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THE MAKING OF MEANING

group work

It is not unusual for famous tennis players to be deeply committed to their game, to take pleasure in playing, but off the court to be morose and hostile. Picasso enjoyed painting, but as soon as he lay down his brushes he turned into a rather unpleasant man. Bobby Fischer, the chess genius, appeared to be helplessly inept except when his mind was on chess. These and countless similar examples are a reminder that having achieved flow in one activity does not necessarily guarantee that it will be carried over to the rest of life.

If we enjoyed work and friendships, and faced every challenge as an opportunity to develop new skills, we would be getting rewards out of living that are outside the realm of ordinary life. Yet even this would not be enough to assure us of optimal experience. As long as enjoyment follows piecemeal from activities not linked to one another in a meaningful way, one is still vulnerable to the vagaries of chaos. Even the most successful career, the most rewarding family relationship eventually runs dry. Sooner or later involvement in work must be reduced. Spouses die, children grow up and move away. To approach optimal experience as closely as is humanly possible, a last step in the control of consciousness is necessary.

What this involves is turning all life into a unified flow experience. If a person sets out to achieve a difficult enough goal, from which all other goals logically follow, and if he or she invests all energy in developing skills to reach that goal, then actions and feelings will be in harmony,

and the separate parts of life will fit together—and each activity will "make sense" in the present, as well as in view of the past and of the future. In such a way, it is possible to give meaning to one's entire life.

But isn't it incredibly naive to expect life to have a coherent overall meaning? After all, at least since Nietzsche concluded that God was dead, philosophers and social scientists have been busy demonstrating that existence has no purpose, that chance and impersonal forces rule our fate, and that all values are relative and hence arbitrary. It *is* true that life has no meaning, if by that we mean a supreme goal built into the fabric of nature and human experience, a goal that is valid for every individual. But it does not follow that life cannot be *given* meaning. Much of what we call culture and civilization consists in efforts people have made, generally against overwhelming odds, to create a sense of purpose for themselves and their descendants. It is one thing to recognize that life is, by itself, meaningless. It is another thing entirely to accept this with resignation. The first fact does not entail the second any more than the fact that we lack wings prevents us from flying.

From the point of view of an individual, it does not matter what the ultimate goal is—provided it is compelling enough to order a lifetime's worth of psychic energy. The challenge might involve the desire to have the best beer-bottle collection in the neighborhood, the resolution to find a cure for cancer, or simply the biological imperative to have children who will survive and prosper. As long as it provides clear objectives, clear rules for action, and a way to concentrate and become involved, any goal can serve to give meaning to a person's life.

In the past few years I have come to be quite well acquainted with several Muslim professionals—electronics engineers, pilots, businessmen, and teachers, mostly from Saudi Arabia and from the other Gulf states. In talking to them, I was struck with how relaxed most of them seemed to be even under strong pressure. "There is nothing to it," those I asked about it told me, in different words, but with the same message: "We don't get upset because we believe that our life is in God's hands, and whatever He decides will be fine with us." Such implicit faith used to be widespread in our culture as well, but it is not easy to find it now. Many of us have to discover a goal that will give meaning to life on our own, without the help of a traditional faith.

WHAT MEANING MEANS

Meaning is a concept difficult to define, since any definition runs the risk of being circular. How do we talk about the meaning of meaning itself? There are three ways in which unpacking the sense of this word helps illuminate the last step in achieving optimal experience. Its first usage points toward the end, purpose, significance of something, as in: *What is the meaning of life?* This sense of the word reflects the assumption that events are linked to each other in terms of an ultimate goal; that there is a temporal order, a causal connection between them. It assumes that phenomena are not random, but fall into recognizable patterns directed by a final purpose. The second usage of the word refers to a person's intentions: *She usually means well.* What this sense of *meaning* implies is that people reveal their purposes in action; that their goals are expressed in predictable, consistent, and orderly ways. Finally, the third sense in which the word is used refers to ordering information, as when one says: *Otorhinolaryngology means the study of ear, nose, and throat,* or: *Red sky in the evening means good weather in the morning.* This sense of *meaning* points to the identity of different words, the relationship between events, and thus it helps to clarify, to establish order among unrelated or conflicting information.

1 Creating meaning involves bringing order to the contents of the mind by integrating one's actions into a unified flow experience. The three senses of the word *meaning* noted above make it clearer how this is accomplished. People who find their lives meaningful usually have a goal that is challenging enough to take up all their energies, a goal that can give significance to their lives. We may refer to this process as achieving *purpose.* To experience flow one must set goals for one's actions: to win a game, to make friends with a person, to accomplish something in a certain way. The goal in itself is usually not important; what matters is that it focuses a person's attention and involves it in an achievable, enjoyable activity. In a similar way, some people are able to bring the same sharp focus to their psychic energy throughout the entirety of their lives. The unrelated goals of the separate flow activities merge into an all-encompassing set of challenges that gives purpose to everything a person does. There are very different ways to establish this directionality. Napoleon devoted his life, and in the process gladly led to death hundreds of thousands of French soldiers, to the single-minded pursuit of power. Mother Teresa has invested all her energies to help the helpless, because her life has been given purpose by an unconditional love based on the belief in God, in a spiritual order beyond the reach of her senses.

From a purely psychological point of view, Napoleon and Mother Teresa may both have achieved equal levels of inner purpose, and therefore of optimal experience. The obvious differences between them prompt a broader ethical question: What have the consequences of

these two ways of giving meaning to life been? We might conclude that Napoleon brought chaos to thousands of lives, whereas Mother Teresa reduced the entropy in the consciousness of many. But here we will not try to pass judgment on the objective value of actions; we will be concerned instead with the more modest task of describing the subjective order that a unified purpose brings to individual consciousness. In this sense the answer to the old riddle "What is the meaning of life?" turns out to be astonishingly simple. The meaning of life *is* meaning: whatever it is, wherever it comes from, a unified purpose is what gives meaning to life.

The second sense of the word *meaning* refers to the expression of intentionality. And this sense also is appropriate to the issue of how to create meaning by transforming all life into a flow activity. It is not enough to find a purpose that unifies one's goals; one must also carry through and meet its challenges. The purpose must result in strivings; intent has to be translated into action. We may call this *resolution* in the pursuit of one's goals. What counts is not so much whether a person actually achieves what she has set out to do; rather, it matters whether effort has been expended to reach the goal, instead of being diffused or wasted. When "the native hue of resolution is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought," Hamlet observed, ". . . enterprises of great pith and moment . . . lose the name of action." Few things are sadder than encountering a person who knows exactly what he should do, yet cannot muster enough energy to do it. "He who desires but acts not," wrote Blake with his accustomed vigor, "breeds pestilence." 2

The third and final way in which life acquires meaning is the result of the previous two steps. When an important goal is pursued with resolution, and all one's varied activities fit together into a unified flow experience, the result is that *harmony* is brought to consciousness. Someone who knows his desires and works with purpose to achieve them is a person whose feelings, thoughts, and actions are congruent with one another, and is therefore a person who has achieved inner harmony. In the 1960s this process was called "getting your head together," but in practically every other historical period a similar concept has been used to describe this necessary step toward living a good life. Someone who is in harmony no matter what he does, no matter what is happening to him, knows that his psychic energy is not being wasted on doubt, regret, guilt, and fear, but is always usefully employed. Inner congruence ultimately leads to that inner strength and serenity we admire in people who seem to have come to terms with themselves. 3

Purpose, resolution, and harmony unify life and give it meaning

1. Set goals
2. intentionality
3. harmony & flow

by transforming it into a seamless flow experience. Whoever achieves this state will never really lack anything else. A person whose consciousness is so ordered need not fear unexpected events, or even death. Every living moment will make sense, and most of it will be enjoyable. This certainly sounds desirable. So how does one attain it?

CULTIVATING PURPOSE

In the lives of many people it is possible to find a unifying purpose that justifies the things they do day in, day out—a goal that like a magnetic field attracts their psychic energy, a goal upon which all lesser goals depend. This goal will define the challenges that a person needs to face in order to transform his or her life into a flow activity. Without such a purpose, even the best-ordered consciousness lacks meaning.

Throughout human history innumerable attempts have been made to discover ultimate goals that would give meaning to experience. These attempts have often been very different from one another. For instance, in the ancient Greek civilization, according to the social philosopher Hannah Arendt, men sought to achieve immortality through heroic deeds, whereas in the Christian world men and women hoped to reach eternal life through saintly deeds. Ultimate goals, in Arendt's opinion, must accommodate the issue of mortality: they must give men and women a purpose that extends beyond the grave. Both immortality and eternity accomplish this, but in very different ways. The Greek heroes performed noble deeds so as to attract the admiration of their peers, expecting that their highly personal acts of bravery would be passed on in songs and stories from generation to generation. Their identity, therefore, would continue to exist in the memory of their descendants. Saints, on the contrary, surrendered individuality so as to merge their thoughts and actions with the will of God, expecting to live forever after in union with Him. The hero and the saint, to the extent that they dedicated the totality of their psychic energy to an all-encompassing goal that prescribed a coherent pattern of behavior to follow until death, turned their lives into unified flow experiences. Other members of society ordered their own less exalted actions on these outstanding models, providing a less clear, but more or less adequate, meaning to their own lives.

Every human culture, by definition, contains meaning systems that can serve as the encompassing purpose by which individuals can order their goals. For instance, Pitrim Sorokin divided the various epochs of Western civilization into three types, which he believed have

alternated with one another for over twenty-five centuries, sometimes lasting hundreds of years, sometimes just a few decades. He called these the *sensate,* the *ideational,* and the *idealistic* phases of culture, and he attempted to demonstrate that in each one a different set of priorities justified the goals of existence.

Sensate cultures are integrated around views of reality designed to satisfy the senses. They tend to be epicurean, utilitarian, concerned primarily with concrete needs. In such cultures art, religion, philosophy, and everyday behavior glorify and justify goals in terms of tangible experience. According to Sorokin, sensate culture predominated in Europe from about 440 to about 200 B.C., with a peak between 420 and 400 B.C.; it has become dominant once again in the past century or so, at least in the advanced capitalist democracies. People in a sensate culture are not necessarily more materialistic, but they organize their goals and justify their behavior with reference primarily to pleasure and practicality rather than to more abstract principles. The challenges they see are almost exclusively concerned with making life more easy, more comfortable, more pleasant. They tend to identify the good with what feels good and mistrust idealized values.

Ideational cultures are organized on a principle opposite from the sensate: they look down on the tangible and strive for nonmaterial, supernatural ends. They emphasize abstract principles, asceticism, and transcendence of material concerns. Art, religion, philosophy, and the justification of everyday behavior tend to be subordinated to the realization of this spiritual order. People turn their attention to religion or ideology, and view their challenges not in terms of making life easier, but of reaching inner clarity and conviction. Greece from 600 to 500 B.C., and Western Europe from 200 B.C. to A.D. 400 are the high points of this worldview, according to Sorokin. More recent and disturbing examples might include the Nazi interlude in Germany, the communist regimes in Russia and China, and the Islamic revival in Iran.

A simple example may illustrate the difference between cultures organized around sensate and ideational principles. In our own as well as in fascist societies physical fitness is cherished and the beauty of the human body worshiped. But the reasons for doing so are very different. In our sensate culture, the body is cultivated in order to achieve health and pleasure. In an ideational culture, the body is valued primarily as a symbol of some abstract principle of metaphysical perfection associated with the idea of the "Aryan race," or "Roman valor." In a sensate culture, a poster of a handsome youth might produce a sexual response to be used for commercial ends. In an ideational culture, the same poster would make an ideological statement, and be used for political ends.

Of course, at no time does any group of people shape its purpose through only one of these two ways of ordering experience to the exclusion of the other. At any given moment, various subtypes and combinations of the sensate and the ideational worldview may coexist in the same culture, and even in the consciousness of the same individual. The so-called yuppie life-style, for instance, is based primarily on sensate principles, while Bible Belt fundamentalism rests on ideational premises. These two forms, in their many variants, coexist somewhat uneasily in our current social system. And either one, functioning as a system of goals, can help to organize life into a coherent flow activity.

Not only cultures but individuals as well embody these meaning systems in their behavior. Business leaders like Lee Iacocca or H. Ross Perot, whose lives are ordered by concrete entrepreneurial challenges, often display the best features of the sensate approach to life. The more primitive aspects of the sensate worldview are represented by someone like Hugh Hefner, whose "playboy philosophy" celebrates the simpleminded pursuit of pleasure. Representatives of an unreflective ideational approach include ideologues and mystics who advocate simple transcendental solutions, such as blind faith in divine providence. There are, of course, many different permutations and combinations: televangelists like the Bakkers or Jimmy Swaggart publicly exhort their audience to value ideational goals, while in private indulging in luxury and sensuality.

1. Sensate
2. Ideational
3. Idealistic
integrates both

Occasionally a culture succeeds in integrating these two dialectically opposed principles into a convincing whole that preserves the advantages of both, while neutralizing the disadvantages of each. Sorokin calls these cultures "idealistic." They combine an acceptance of concrete sensory experience with a reverence for spiritual ends. In Western Europe the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance were classified by Sorokin as being relatively most idealistic, with the highest points reached in the first two decades of the fourteenth century. Needless to say, the idealistic solution seems to be the preferable one, as it avoids the listlessness that is often the keynote of purely materialistic worldviews and the fanatical asceticism that bedevils many ideational systems.

Sorokin's simple trichotomy is a debatable method of categorizing cultures, but it is useful in illustrating some of the principles by which men and women end up ordering their ultimate goals. The sensate option is always quite popular. It involves responding to concrete challenges, and shaping one's life in terms of a flow activity that tends toward material ends. Among its advantages is the fact that the rules are comprehended by everyone and that feedback tends to be clear—the desirability of health, money, power, and sexual satisfaction is seldom controversial. But the ideational option also has its advantages: metaphysical goals may never be achieved, but then failure is almost impossible to prove: the true believer can always distort feedback to use it as a proof that he has been right, that he is among the chosen. Probably the most satisfying way to unify life into an all-embracing flow activity is through the idealistic mode. But setting challenges that involve the improvement of material conditions while at the same time pursuing spiritual ends is not easy, especially when the culture as a whole is predominantly sensate in character.

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Another way to describe how individuals order their actions is to focus on the complexity of the challenges they set for themselves rather than on their content. Perhaps what matters most is not whether a person is materialist or ideational, but how differentiated and integrated are the goals he or she pursues in those areas. As was discussed in the final section of chapter 2, complexity depends on how well a system develops its unique traits and potentialities and on how well related these traits are to each other. In that respect, a well-thought-out sensate approach to life, one that was responsive to a great variety of concrete human experiences and was internally consistent, would be preferable to an unreflective idealism, and vice versa.

Show Maslow's hierarchy

There is a consensus among psychologists who study such subjects that people develop their concept of who they are, and of what they want to achieve in life, according to a sequence of steps. Each man or woman starts with a need to preserve the self, to keep the body and its basic goals from disintegrating. At this point the meaning of life is simple; it is tantamount to survival, comfort, and pleasure. When the safety of the physical self is no longer in doubt, the person may expand the horizon of his or her meaning system to embrace the values of a community—the family, the neighborhood, a religious or ethnic group. This step leads to a greater complexity of the self, even though it usually implies conformity to conventional norms and standards. The next step in development involves reflective individualism. The person again turns inward, finding new grounds for authority and value within the self. He or she is no longer blindly conforming, but develops an autonomous conscience. At this point the main goal in life becomes the desire for growth, improvement, the actualization of potential. The fourth step, which builds on all the previous ones, is a final turning away from the self, back toward an integration with other people and with universal values. In this final stage the extremely individualized person—like Siddhartha letting the river take control of his boat—willingly merges his interests with those of a larger whole.

In this scenario building a complex meaning system seems to involve focusing attention alternately on the self and on the Other. First, psychic energy is invested in the needs of the organism, and psychic order is equivalent to pleasure. When this level is temporarily achieved, and the person can begin to invest attention in the goals of a community, what is meaningful corresponds to group values—religion, patriotism, and the acceptance and respect of other people provide the parameters of inner order. The next movement of the dialectic brings attention back to the self: having achieved a sense of belonging to a larger human system, the person now feels the challenge of discerning the limits of personal potential. This leads to attempts at self-actualization, to experimentation with different skills, different ideas and disciplines. At this stage enjoyment, rather than pleasure, becomes the main source of rewards. But because this phase involves becoming a seeker, the person may also encounter a midlife crisis, a career change, and an increasingly desperate straining against the limitations of individual capability. From this point on the person is ready for the last shift in the redirection of energy: having discovered what one can and, more important, cannot do alone, the ultimate goal merges with a system larger than the person—a cause, an idea, a transcendental entity.

Not everyone moves through the stages of this spiral of ascending complexity. A few never have the opportunity to go beyond the first step. When survival demands are so insistent that a person cannot devote much attention to anything else, he or she will not have enough psychic energy left to invest in the goals of the family or of the wider community. Self-interest alone will give meaning to life. The majority of people are probably ensconced comfortably in the second stage of development, where the welfare of the family, or the company, the community, or the nation are the sources of meaning. Many fewer reach the third level of reflective individualism, and only a precious few emerge once again to forge a unity with universal values. So these stages do not necessarily reflect what does happen, or what will happen; they characterize what *can* happen if a person is lucky and succeeds in controlling consciousness.

The four stages outlined above are the simplest of the models for describing the emergence of meaning along a gradient of complexity; other models detail six, or even eight, stages. The number of steps is irrelevant; what counts is that most theories recognize the importance

of this dialectic tension, this alternation between differentiation on the one hand and integration on the other. From this point of view, individual life appears to consist of a series of different "games," with different goals and challenges, that change with time as a person matures. Complexity requires that we invest energy in developing whatever skills we were born with, in becoming autonomous, self-reliant, conscious of our uniqueness and of its limitations. At the same time we must invest energy in recognizing, understanding, and finding ways to adapt to the forces beyond the boundaries of our own individuality. Of course we don't *have* to undertake any of these plans. But if we don't, chances are, sooner or later, we will regret it.

FORGING RESOLVE

Purpose gives direction to one's efforts, but it does not necessarily make life easier. Goals can lead into all sorts of trouble, at which point one gets tempted to give them up and find some less demanding script by which to order one's actions. The price one pays for changing goals whenever opposition threatens is that while one may achieve a more pleasant and comfortable life, it is likely that it will end up empty and void of meaning.

The Pilgrims who first settled this country decided that the freedom to worship according to their conscience was necessary to maintain the integrity of their selves. They believed that nothing mattered more than maintaining control over their relationship with the supreme being. Theirs was not a novel choice for an ultimate goal by which to order one's life—many other people had done so previously. What distinguished the Pilgrims was that—like the Jews of Masada, the Christian martyrs, the Cathars of southern France in the late Middle Ages who had chosen similarly—they did not allow persecution and hardship to blunt their resolve. Instead they followed the logic of their convictions wherever it led, acting *as if* their values were worth giving up comfort, and even life itself, for. And because they acted thus, their goals in fact *became* worthwhile regardless of whether they had been originally valuable. Because their goals had become valuable through commitment, they helped give meaning to the Pilgrims' existence.

No goal can have much effect unless taken seriously. Each goal prescribes a set of consequences, and if one isn't prepared to reckon with them, the goal becomes meaningless. The mountaineer who decides to scale a difficult peak knows that he will be exhausted and endangered for most of the climb. But if he gives up too easily, his quest will be

to value commitment goals

revealed as having little value. The same is true of all flow experiences: there is a mutual relationship between goals and the effort they require. Goals justify the effort they demand at the outset, but later it is the effort that justifies the goal. One gets married because the spouse seems worthy of sharing one's life with, but unless one then behaves as if this is true, the partnership will appear to lose value with time.

All things considered, it cannot be said that humankind has lacked the courage to back its resolutions. Billions of parents, in every age and in every culture, have sacrificed themselves for their children, and thereby made life more meaningful for themselves. Probably as many have devoted all their energies to preserving their fields and their flocks. Millions more have surrendered everything for the sake of their religion, their country, or their art. For those who have done so consistently, despite pain and failure, life as a whole had a chance to become like an extended episode of flow: a focused, concentrated, internally coherent, logically ordered set of experiences, which, because of its inner order, was felt to be meaningful and enjoyable.

But as the complexity of culture evolves, it becomes more difficult to achieve this degree of total resolve. There are simply too many goals competing for prominence, and who is to say which one is worth the dedication of an entire life? Just a few decades ago a woman felt perfectly justified in placing the welfare of her family as her ultimate goal. Partly this was due to the fact that she did not have many other options. Today, now that she can be a businessperson, a scholar, an artist, or even a soldier, it is no longer "obvious" that being a wife and mother should be a woman's first priority. The same embarrassment of riches affects us all. Mobility has freed us from ties to our birthplaces: there is no longer any reason to become involved in one's native community, to identify with one's place of birth. If the grass looks greener across the fence, we simply move to the other field—How about opening that little restaurant in Australia? Life-styles and religions are choices that are easily switched. In the past a hunter was a hunter until he died, a blacksmith spent his life perfecting his craft. We can now shed our occupational identities at will: no one needs to remain an accountant forever.

The wealth of options we face today has extended personal freedom to an extent that would have been inconceivable even a hundred years ago. But the inevitable consequence of equally attractive choices is uncertainty of purpose; uncertainty, in turn, saps resolution, and lack of resolve ends up devaluing choice. Therefore freedom does not necessarily help develop meaning in life—on the contrary. If the rules of a game become too flexible, concentration flags, and it is more difficult to attain a flow experience. Commitment to a goal and to the rules it entails is much easier when the choices are few and clear.

This is not to imply that a return to the rigid values and limited choices of the past would be preferable—even if that were a possibility, which it is not. The complexity and freedom that have been thrust upon us, and that our ancestors had fought so hard to achieve, are a challenge we must find ways to master. If we do, the lives of our descendants will be infinitely more enriched than anything previously experienced on this planet. If we do not, we run the risk of frittering away our energies on contradictory, meaningless goals.

But in the meantime how do we know where to invest psychic energy? There is no one *out there* to tell us, "Here is a goal worth spending your life on." Because there is no absolute certainty to which to turn, each person must discover ultimate purpose on his or her own. Through trial and error, through intense cultivation, we can straighten out the tangled skein of conflicting goals, and choose the one that will give purpose to action.

Self-knowledge—an ancient remedy so old that its value is easily forgotten—is the process through which one may organize conflicting options. "Know thyself" was carved over the entrance to the Delphic oracle, and ever since untold pious epigrams have extolled its virtue. The reason the advice is so often repeated is that it works. We need, however, to rediscover afresh every generation what these words mean, what the advice actually implies for each individual. And to do that it is useful to express it in terms of current knowledge, and envision a contemporary method for its application.

Inner conflict is the result of competing claims on attention. Too many desires, too many incompatible goals struggle to marshal psychic energy toward their own ends. It follows that the only way to reduce conflict is by sorting out the essential claims from those that are not, and by arbitrating priorities among those that remain. There are basically two ways to accomplish this: what the ancients called the *vita activa,* a life of action, and the *vita contemplativa,* or the path of reflection.

Immersed in the *vita activa,* a person achieves flow through total involvement in concrete external challenges. Many great leaders like Winston Churchill or Andrew Carnegie set for themselves lifelong goals that they pursued with great resolve, without any apparent internal struggle or questioning of priorities. Successful executives, experienced professionals, and talented craftspeople learn to trust their judgment and competence so that they again begin to act with the unselfconscious spontaneity of children. If the arena for action is challenging enough, a person may experience flow continuously in his or her calling, thus leaving as little room as possible for noticing the entropy of normal life. In this way harmony is restored to consciousness indirectly—not by facing up to contradictions and trying to resolve conflicting goals and desires, but by pursuing chosen goals with such intensity that all potential competition is preempted.

Action helps create inner order, but it has its drawbacks. A person strongly dedicated to achieving pragmatic ends might eliminate internal conflict, but often at the price of excessively restricting options. The young engineer who aims to become plant manager at age forty-five and bends all his energies to that end may sail through several years successfully and without hesitation. Sooner or later, however, postponed alternatives may reappear again as intolerable doubts and regrets. Was it worth sacrificing my health for the promotion? What happened to those lovely children who have suddenly turned into sullen adolescents? Now that I have achieved power and financial security, what do I do with it? In other words, the goals that have sustained action over a period turn out not to have enough power to give meaning to the entirety of life.

This is where the presumed advantage of a contemplative life comes in. Detached reflection upon experience, a realistic weighing of options and their consequences, have long been held to be the best approach to a good life. Whether it is played out on the psychoanalyst's couch, where repressed desires are laboriously reintegrated with the rest of consciousness, or whether it is performed as methodically as the Jesuits' test of conscience, which involves reviewing one's actions one or more times each day to check whether what one has been doing in the past few hours has been consistent with long-term goals, self-knowledge can be pursued in innumerable ways, each leading potentially to greater inner harmony.

Activity and reflection should ideally complement and support each other. Action by itself is blind, reflection impotent. Before investing great amounts of energy in a goal, it pays to raise the fundamental questions: Is this something I really want to do? Is it something I enjoy doing? Am I likely to enjoy it in the foreseeable future? Is the price that I—and others—will have to pay worth it? Will I be able to live with myself if I accomplish it?

These seemingly easy questions are almost impossible to answer for someone who has lost touch with his own experience. If a man has not bothered to find out what he wants, if his attention is so wrapped up in external goals that he fails to notice his own feelings, then he

cannot plan action meaningfully. On the other hand, if the habit of reflection is well developed, a person need not go through a lot of soul-searching to decide whether a course of action is entropic or not. He will know, almost intuitively, that this promotion will produce more stress than it is worth, or that this particular friendship, attractive as it is, would lead to unacceptable tensions in the context of marriage.

It is relatively easy to bring order to the mind for short stretches of time; any realistic goal can accomplish this. A good game, an emergency at work, a happy interlude at home will focus attention and produce the harmonious experience of flow. But it is much more difficult to extend this state of being through the entirety of life. For this it is necessary to invest energy in goals that are so persuasive that they justify effort even when our resources are exhausted and when fate is merciless in refusing us a chance at having a comfortable life. If goals are well chosen, and if we have the courage to abide by them despite opposition, we shall be so focused on the actions and events around us that we won't have the time to be unhappy. And then we shall directly feel a sense of order in the warp and the woof of life that fits every thought and emotion into a harmonious whole.

RECOVERING HARMONY

The consequence of forging life by purpose and resolution is a sense of inner harmony, a dynamic order in the contents of consciousness. But, it may be argued, why should it be so difficult to achieve this inner order? Why should one strive so hard to make life into a coherent flow experience? Aren't people born at peace with themselves—isn't human nature naturally ordered?

The original condition of human beings, prior to the development of self-reflective consciousness, must have been a state of inner peace disturbed only now and again by tides of hunger, sexuality, pain, and danger. The forms of psychic entropy that currently cause us so much anguish—unfulfilled wants, dashed expectations, loneliness, frustration, anxiety, guilt—are all likely to have been recent invaders of the mind. They are by-products of the tremendous increase in complexity of the cerebral cortex and of the symbolic enrichment of culture. They are the dark side of the emergence of consciousness.

If we were to interpret the lives of animals with a human eye, we would conclude that they are in flow most of the time because their perception of what has to be done generally coincides with what they are prepared to do. When a lion feels hungry, it will start grumbling and looking for prey until its hunger is satisfied; afterward it lies down to bask in the sun, dreaming the dreams lions dream. There is no reason to believe that it suffers from unfulfilled ambition, or that it is overwhelmed by pressing responsibilities. Animals' skills are always matched to concrete demands because their minds, such as they are, only contain information about what is actually present in the environment *in relation to* their bodily states, as determined by instinct. So a hungry lion only perceives what will help it to find a gazelle, while a sated lion concentrates fully on the warmth of the sun. Its mind does not weigh possibilities unavailable at the moment; it neither imagines pleasant alternatives, nor is it disturbed by fears of failure.

Animals suffer just as we do when their biologically programmed goals are frustrated. They feel the pangs of hunger, pain, and unsatisfied sexual urges. Dogs bred to be friends to man grow distraught when left alone by their masters. But animals other than man are not in a position to be the cause of their own suffering; they are not evolved enough to be able to feel confusion and despair even after all their needs are satisfied. When free of externally induced conflicts, they are in harmony with themselves and experience the seamless concentration that in people we call flow.

The psychic entropy peculiar to the human condition involves seeing more to do than one can actually accomplish and feeling able to accomplish more than what conditions allow. But this becomes possible only if one keeps in mind more than one goal at a time, being aware at the same time of conflicting desires. It can happen only when the mind knows not only what *is* but also what *could be*. The more complex any system, the more room it leaves open for alternatives, and the more things can go wrong with it. This is certainly applicable to the evolution of the mind: as it has increased its power to handle information, the potential for inner conflict has increased as well. When there are too many demands, options, challenges, we become anxious; when too few, we get bored.

To pursue the evolutionary analogy, and to extend it from biological to social evolution, it is probably true that in less developed cultures, where the number and complexity of social roles, of alternative goals and courses of action, are negligible, the chances for experiencing flow are greater. The myth of the "happy savage" is based on the observation that when free of external threats, preliterate people often display a serenity that seems enviable to the visitor from more differentiated cultures. But the myth tells only half the story: when hungry or hurting, the "savage" is no more happy than we would be; and he may be in that

condition more often than we are. The inner harmony of technologically less advanced people is the positive side of their limited choices and of their stable repertory of skills, just as the confusion in our soul is the necessary consequence of unlimited opportunities and constant perfectibility. Goethe represented this dilemma in the bargain Doctor Faustus, the archetype of modern man, made with Mephistopheles: the good doctor gained knowledge and power, but at the price of introducing disharmony in his soul.

There is no need to visit far-off lands to see how flow can be a natural part of living. Every child, before self-consciousness begins to interfere, acts spontaneously with total abandon and complete involvement. Boredom is something children have to learn the hard way, in response to artificially restricted choices. Again, this does not mean that children are always happy. Cruel or neglectful parents, poverty and sickness, the inevitable accidents of living make children suffer intensely. But a child is rarely unhappy without good reason. It is understandable that people tend to be so nostalgic about their early years; like Tolstoy's Ivan Ilyich, many feel that the wholehearted serenity of childhood, the undivided participation in the here and now, becomes increasingly difficult to recapture as the years go by.

When we can imagine only few opportunities and few possibilities, it is relatively easy to achieve harmony. Desires are simple, choices clear. There is little room for conflict and no need to compromise. This is the order of simple systems—order by default, as it were. It is a fragile harmony; step by step with the increase of complexity, the chances of entropy generated internally by the system increase as well.

We can isolate many factors to account for why consciousness gets to be more complex. At the level of the species, the biological evolution of the central nervous system is one cause. No longer ruled entirely by instincts and reflexes, the mind is endowed with the dubious blessing of choice. At the level of human history, the development of culture—of languages, belief systems, technologies—is another reason why the contents of the mind become differentiated. As social systems move from dispersed hunting tribes to crowded cities, they give rise to more specialized roles that often require conflicting thoughts and actions from the same person. No longer is every man a hunter, sharing skills and interests with every other man. The farmer and the miller, the priest and the soldier now see the world differently from one another. There is no one right way to behave, and each role requires different skills. Within the individual life span as well, each person becomes exposed with age to increasingly contradictory goals, to incompatible opportunities for action. A child's options are usually few and coherent; with each year, they become less so. The earlier clarity that made spontaneous flow possible is obscured by a cacophony of disparate values, beliefs, choices, and behaviors.

Few would argue that a simpler consciousness, no matter how harmonious, is preferable to a more complex one. While we might admire the serenity of the lion in repose, the tribesman's untroubled acceptance of his fate, or the child's wholehearted involvement in the present, they cannot offer a model for resolving our predicament. The order based on innocence is now beyond our grasp. Once the fruit is plucked from the tree of knowledge, the way back to Eden is barred forever.

THE UNIFICATION OF MEANING IN LIFE THEMES

Instead of accepting the unity of purpose provided by genetic instructions or by the rules of society, the challenge for us is to create harmony based on reason and choice. Philosophers like Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty have recognized this task of modern man by calling it the *project,* which is their term for the goal-directed actions that provide shape and meaning to an individual's life. Psychologists have used terms like *propriate strivings* or *life themes.* In each case, these concepts identify a set of goals linked to an ultimate goal that gives significance to whatever a person does.

The life theme, like a game that prescribes the rules and actions one must follow to experience flow, identifies what will make existence enjoyable. With a life theme, everything that happens will have a meaning—not necessarily a positive one, but a meaning nevertheless. If a person bends all her energies to making a million dollars before age thirty, whatever happens is a step either toward or away from that goal. The clear feedback will keep her involved with her actions. Even if she loses all her money, her thoughts and actions are tied by a common purpose, and they will be experienced as worthwhile. Similarly a person who decides that finding a cure for cancer is what she wants to accomplish above all else will usually know whether she is getting closer to her goal or not—in either case, what must be done is clear, and whatever she does will make sense.

When a person's psychic energy coalesces into a life theme, consciousness achieves harmony. But not all life themes are equally productive. Existential philosophers distinguish between *authentic* and *inauthentic* projects. The first describes the theme of a person who realizes that choices are free, and makes a personal decision based on a rational evaluation of his experience. It does not matter what the choice is, as long as it is an expression of what the person genuinely feels and believes. Inauthentic projects are those a person chooses because they are what she feels ought to be done, because they are what everybody else is doing, and therefore there is no alternative. Authentic projects tend to be intrinsically motivated, chosen for what they are worth in themselves; inauthentic ones are motivated by external forces. A similar distinction is that between *discovered* life themes, when a person writes the script for her actions out of personal experience and awareness of choice; and *accepted* life themes, when a person simply takes on a predetermined role from a script written long ago by others.

Both types of life themes help give meaning to life, but each has drawbacks. The accepted life theme works well as long as the social system is sound; if it is not, it can trap the person into perverted goals. Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi who calmly shipped tens of thousands to the gas chambers, was a man for whom the rules of bureaucracy were sacred. He probably experienced flow as he shuffled the intricate schedules of trains, making certain that the scarce rolling stock was available where needed, and that the bodies were transported at the least expense. He never seemed to question whether what he was asked to do was right or wrong. As long as he followed orders, his consciousness was in harmony. For him the meaning of life was to be part of a strong, organized institution; nothing else mattered. In peaceful, well-ordered times a man like Adolf Eichmann might have been an esteemed pillar of the community. But the vulnerability of his life theme becomes apparent when unscrupulous and demented people seize control of society; then such an upright citizen turns into an accessory to crimes without having to change his goals, and without even realizing the inhumanity of his actions.

Discovered life themes are fragile for a different reason: because they are products of a personal struggle to define the purpose of life, they have less social legitimacy; because they are often novel and idiosyncratic, they may be regarded by others as crazy or destructive. Some of the most powerful life themes are based on ancient human goals, but freshly discovered and freely chosen by the individual. Malcolm X, who in his early life followed the behavioral script for young men in the slum, fighting and dealing drugs, discovered in jail, through reading and reflection, a different set of goals through which to achieve dignity and self-respect. In essence he invented an entirely new identity, although one that was made up of bits and pieces of earlier human achievements. Instead of continuing to play the game of hustlers and pimps, he created a more complex purpose that could help order the lives of many other marginal men, black or white.

A man interviewed in one of our studies whom we shall designate as E. provides another example of how a life theme can be discovered, even though the purpose underlying it is a very ancient one. E. grew up the son of a poor immigrant family in the early part of this century. His parents knew only a few words of English, and were barely able to read and write. They were intimidated by the frenetic pace of life in New York, but they worshiped and admired America and the authorities who represented it. When he was seven, E.'s parents spent a good chunk of their savings to buy him a bicycle for his birthday. A few days later, as he was riding in the neighborhood, he was hit by a car that had ignored a stop sign. E. suffered serious wounds, and his bike was wrecked. The driver of the car was a wealthy doctor; he drove E. to a hospital, asking him not to report what had happened, but promising in return to pay for all expenses and to buy him a new bike. E. and his parents were convinced, and they went along with the deal. Unfortunately the doctor never showed up again, and E.'s father had to borrow money to pay the expensive hospital bill; the bike was never replaced.

This event could have been a trauma that left its scar on E. forever, turning him into a cynic who would from now on look out for his own self-interest no matter what. Instead E. drew a curious lesson from his experience. He used it to create a life theme that not only gave meaning to his own life but helped reduce entropy in the experience of many other people. For many years after the accident, E. and his parents were bitter, suspicious, and confused about the intentions of strangers. E.'s father, feeling that he was a failure, took to drinking and became morose and withdrawn. It looked as though poverty and helplessness were having their expected effects. But when he was fourteen or fifteen years old, E. had to read in school the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights. He connected the principles in those documents with his own experience. Gradually he became convinced that his family's poverty and alienation were not their fault, but were the result of not being aware of their rights, of not knowing the rules of the game, of not having effective representation among those who had power.

He decided to become a lawyer, not only to better his own life, but to make certain that injustices such as he had suffered would not occur so easily again to others in his position. Once he had set this goal for himself, his resolution was unwavering. He was accepted into law school, clerked for a famous justice, became a judge himself, and at the zenith of his career spent years in the cabinet helping the president develop stronger civil rights policies and legislation to help the disadvantaged. Until the end of his life his thoughts, actions, and feelings were unified by the theme he had chosen as a teenager. Whatever he did to the end of his days was part of one great game, held together by goals and rules he had agreed to abide by. He felt his life had meaning, and enjoyed confronting the challenges that came his way.

E.'s example illustrates several common characteristics of how people forge discovered life themes. In the first place, the theme is in many cases a *reaction to a great personal hurt suffered in early life*—to being orphaned, abandoned, or treated unjustly. But what matters is not the trauma per se; the external event never determines what the theme will be. What matters is the interpretation that one places on the suffering. If a father is a violent alcoholic, his children have several options for explaining what is wrong: they can tell themselves that the father is a bastard who deserves to die; that he is a man, and all men are weak and violent; that poverty is the cause of the father's affliction, and the only way to avoid his fate is to become rich; that a large part of his behavior is due to helplessness and lack of education. Only the last of these equally likely explanations leads in the direction of a life theme such as E. was able to develop.

So the next question is, What kinds of explanations for one's suffering lead to negentropic life themes? If a child abused by a violent father concluded that the problem was inherent in human nature, that all men were weak and violent, there would not be much he or she could do about it. How could a child change human nature? To find purpose in suffering one must interpret it as a *possible challenge*. In this case, by formulating his problem as being due to the helplessness of disenfranchised minorities, and not to his father's faults, E. was able *to develop appropriate skills*—his legal training—to confront the challenges he saw at the root of what had been wrong in his personal life. What transforms the consequences of a traumatic event into a challenge that gives meaning to life is what in the previous chapter was called a *dissipative structure*, or the ability to draw order from disorder.

Finally, a complex, negentropic life theme is rarely formulated as the response to just a personal problem. Instead, *the challenge becomes generalized to other people, or to mankind as a whole.* For example, in E.'s case, he attributed the problem of helplessness not only to himself or to his own family but to all poor immigrants in the same situation as his parents had been. Thus whatever solution he found to his own problems would benefit not only himself, but many others besides. This altruistic way of generalizing solutions is typical of negentropic life themes; it brings harmony to the lives of many.

Gottfried, another one of the men interviewed by our University of Chicago team, provides a similar example. As a child Gottfried was very close to his mother, and his memories of those early years are sunny and warm. But before he turned ten, his mother developed cancer, and died in great pain. The young boy could have felt sorry for himself and become depressed, or he could have adopted hardened cynicism as a defense. Instead he began to think of the disease as his personal enemy, and swore to defeat it. In time he earned a medical degree and became a research oncologist, and the results of his work have become part of the pattern of knowledge that eventually will free mankind of this scourge. In this case, again, a personal tragedy became transformed into a challenge that can be met. In developing skills to meet that challenge, the individual improves the lives of other people.

Ever since Freud, psychologists have been interested in explaining how early childhood trauma leads to adult psychic dysfunction. This line of causation is fairly easy to understand. More difficult to explain, and more interesting, is the opposite outcome: the instances when suffering gives a person the incentive to become a great artist, a wise statesman, or a scientist. If one assumes that external events must determine psychic outcomes, then it makes sense to see the neurotic response to suffering as normal, and the constructive response as "defense" or "sublimation." But if one assumes that people have a choice in how they respond to external events, in what meaning they attribute to suffering, then one can interpret the constructive response as normal and the neurotic one as a failure to rise to the challenge, as a breakdown in the ability to flow.

What makes some people able to develop a coherent purpose, while others struggle through an empty or meaningless life? There is no simple answer, of course, because whether a person will discover a harmonious theme in the apparent chaos of experience is influenced by many factors, both internal and external. It is easier to doubt that life makes sense if one is born deformed, poor, and oppressed. But even here, this is not inevitably the case: Antonio Gramsci, the philosopher of humane socialism and a man who left a profound mark on recent European thought, was born a hunchback in a miserable peasant hovel. As he was growing up, his father was jailed for many years (unjustly, as it turned out), and the family could barely survive from day to day. Antonio was so sickly as a child that for years his mother is said to have dressed him in his best clothes every evening and laid him out to sleep

in a coffin, expecting him to be dead by morning. Altogether, it was not a very promising start. Yet despite these and many other handicaps Gramsci struggled to survive and even succeeded in getting himself an education. And he did not stop when he achieved a modest security as a teacher, for he had decided that what he really wanted from life was to struggle against the social conditions that broke his mother's health and destroyed his father's honor. He ended up being a university professor, a deputy in parliament, and one of the most fearless leaders against fascism. Until the very end, before he finally died in one of Mussolini's prisons, he wrote beautiful essays about the wonderful world that could be ours if we stopped being fearful and greedy.

There are so many examples of this type of personality that one certainly cannot assume a direct causal relation between external disorder in childhood and internal lack of meaning later in life: Thomas Edison as a child was sickly, poor, and believed to be retarded by his teacher; Eleanor Roosevelt was a lonely, neurotic young girl; Albert Einstein's early years were filled with anxieties and disappointments—yet they all ended up inventing powerful and useful lives for themselves.

If there is a strategy shared by these and by other people who succeed in building meaning into their experience, it is one so simple and obvious that it is almost embarrassing to mention. Yet because it is so often overlooked, especially nowadays, it will be valuable to review it. The strategy consists in extracting from the order achieved by past generations patterns that will help avoid disorder in one's own mind. There is much knowledge—or well-ordered information—accumulated in culture, ready for this use. Great music, architecture, art, poetry, drama, dance, philosophy, and religion are there for anyone to see as examples of how harmony can be imposed on chaos. Yet so many people ignore them, expecting to create meaning in their lives by their own devices.

To do so is like trying to build up material culture from scratch in each generation. No one in his right mind would want to start reinventing the wheel, fire, electricity, and the million objects and processes that we now take for granted as part of the human environment. Instead we learn how to make these things by receiving ordered information from teachers, from books, from models, so as to benefit from the knowledge of the past and eventually surpass it. To discard the hard-won information on how to live accumulated by our ancestors, or to expect to discover a viable set of goals all by oneself, is misguided hubris. The chances of success are about as good as in trying to build an electron microscope without the tools and knowledge of physics.

People who as adults develop coherent life themes often recall that when they were very young, their parents told them stories and read from books. When told by a loving adult whom one trusts, fairy tales, biblical stories, heroic historical deeds, and poignant family events are often the first intimations of meaningful order a person gleans from the experience of the past. In contrast, we found in our studies that individuals who never focus on any goal, or accept one unquestioningly from the society around them, tend not to remember their parents having read or told stories to them as children. Saturday morning kiddie shows on television, with their pointless sensationalism, are unlikely to achieve the same purpose.

Story telling importance

Whatever one's background, there are still many opportunities later on in life to draw meaning from the past. Most people who discover complex life themes remember either an older person or a historical figure whom they greatly admired and who served as a model, or they recall having read a book that revealed new possibilities for action. For instance, a now famous social scientist, widely respected for his integrity, tells how when he was in his early teens he read *A Tale of Two Cities*, and was so impressed by the social and political chaos Dickens described—which echoed the turmoil his parents had experienced in Europe after World War I—that he decided then and there that he would spend his life trying to understand why people made life miserable for one another. Another young boy, reared in a harsh orphanage, thought to himself, after reading by chance a Horatio Alger story in which a similarly poor and lonely youth makes his way in life by dint of hard work and good luck, "If he could do it, why not me?" Today this person is a retired banker well known for his philanthropy. Others remember being changed forever by the rational order of the Platonic *Dialogues* or by the courageous acts of characters in a science fiction story.

literature

At its best, literature contains ordered information about behavior, models of purpose, and examples of lives successfully patterned around meaningful goals. Many people confronted with the randomness of existence have drawn hope from the knowledge that others before them had faced similar problems, and had been able to prevail. And this is just literature; what about music, art, philosophy, and religion?

Occasionally I run a seminar for business managers on the topic of how to handle the midlife crisis. Many of these successful executives, having risen as far as they are likely to advance in their organizations, and often with their family and private lives in disarray, welcome the opportunity to spend some time thinking about what they want to do next. For years I have relied on the best theories and research results

in developmental psychology for the lectures and discussions. I was reasonably content with how these seminars worked out, and the participants usually felt that they had learned something useful. But I was never quite satisfied that the material made enough sense.

Finally it occurred to me to try something more unusual. I would begin the seminar with a quick review of Dante's *Divina Commedia*. After all, written over six hundred years ago, this was the earliest description I knew of a midlife crisis and its resolution. "In the middle of the journey of our life," writes Dante in the first line of his enormously long and rich poem, "I found myself inside a dark forest, for the right way I had completely lost." What happens afterward is a gripping and in many ways still relevant account of the difficulties to be encountered in middle age.

Dante on midlife crisis

First of all, wandering in the dark forest, Dante realizes that three fierce beasts are stalking him, licking their chops in anticipation. They are a lion, a lynx, and a she-wolf—representing, among other things, ambition, lust, and greed. As for the contemporary protagonist of one of the bestsellers of 1988, the middle-aged New York bond trader in Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities*, Dante's nemesis turns out to be the desire for power, sex, and money. To avoid being destroyed by them, Dante tries to escape by climbing a hill. But the beasts keep drawing nearer, and in desperation Dante calls for divine help. His prayer is answered by an apparition: it is the ghost of Virgil, a poet who died more than a thousand years before Dante was born, but whose wise and majestic verse Dante admired so much that he thought of the poet as his mentor. Virgil tries to reassure Dante: The good news is that there is a way out of the dark forest. The bad news is that the way leads through hell. And through hell they slowly wend their way, witnessing as they go the sufferings of those who had never chosen a goal, and the even worse fate of those whose purpose in life had been to increase entropy—the so-called "sinners."

I was rather concerned about how the harried business executives would take to this centuries-old parable. Chances were, I feared, that they would regard it as a waste of their precious time. I need not have worried. We never had as open and as serious a discussion of the pitfalls of midlife, and of the options for enriching the years that would follow, as we had after talking about the *Commedia*. Later, several participants told me privately that starting the seminar with Dante had been a great idea. His story focused the issues so clearly that it became much easier to think and to talk about them afterward.

Dante is an important model for another reason as well. Although his poem is informed by a deep religious ethic, it is very clear to anyone who reads it that Dante's Christianity is not an *accepted* but a *discovered* belief. In other words, the religious life theme he created was made up of the best insights of Christianity combined with the best of Greek philosophy and Islamic wisdom that had filtered into Europe. At the same time, his Inferno is densely populated with popes, cardinals, and clerics suffering eternal damnation. Even his first guide, Virgil, is not a Christian saint but a heathen poet. Dante recognized that every system of spiritual order, when it becomes incorporated into a worldly structure like an organized church, begins to suffer the effects of entropy. So to extract meaning from a system of beliefs a person must first compare the information contained in it with his or her concrete experience, retain what makes sense, and then reject the rest.

critical thinking

These days we occasionally still meet people whose lives reveal an inner order based on the spiritual insights of the great religions of the past. Despite what we read every day about the amorality of the stock market, the corruption of defense contractors, and the lack of principles in politicians, examples to the contrary do exist. Thus there are also successful businessmen who spend some of their free time in hospitals keeping company with dying patients because they believe that reaching out to people who suffer is a necessary part of a meaningful life. And many people continue to derive strength and serenity from prayer, people for whom a personally meaningful belief system provides goals and rules for intense flow experiences.

But it seems clear that an increasing majority are not being helped by traditional religions and belief systems. Many are unable to separate the truth in the old doctrines from the distortions and degradations that time has added, and since they cannot accept error, they reject the truth as well. Others are so desperate for some order that they cling rigidly to whatever belief happens to be at hand—warts and all—and become fundamentalist Christians, or Muslims, or communists.

Is there any possibility that a new system of goals and means will arise to help give meaning to the lives of our children in the next century? Some people are confident that Christianity restored to its former glory will answer that need. Some still believe that communism will solve the problem of chaos in human experience and that its order will spread across the world. At present, neither of these outcomes seems likely.

If a new faith is to capture our imagination, it must be one that will account rationally for the things we know, the things we feel, the things we hope for, and the ones we dread. It must be a system of beliefs

that will marshal our psychic energy toward meaningful goals, a system that provides rules for a way of life that can provide flow.

It is difficult to imagine that a system of beliefs such as this will not be based, at least to some degree, on what science has revealed about humanity and about the universe. Without such a foundation, our consciousness would remain split between faith and knowledge. But if science is to be of real help, it will have to transform itself. In addition to the various specialized disciplines aimed at describing and controlling isolated aspects of reality, it will have to develop an integrated interpretation of all that is known, and relate it to humankind and its destiny.

One way to accomplish this is through the concept of evolution. Everything that matters most to us—such questions as: Where did we come from? Where are we going? What powers shape our lives? What is good and bad? How are we related to one another, and to the rest of the universe? What are the consequences of our actions?—could be discussed in a systematic way in terms of what we now know about evolution and even more in terms of what we are going to know about it in the future.

The obvious critique of this scenario is that science in general, and the science of evolution in particular, deals with what *is*, not with what *ought to be*. Faiths and beliefs, on the other hand, are not limited by actuality; they deal with what is right, what is desirable. But one of the consequences of an evolutionary faith might be precisely a closer integration between the *is* and the *ought*. When we understand better why we are as we are, when we appreciate more fully the origins of instinctual drives, social controls, cultural expressions—all the elements that contribute to the formation of consciousness—it will become easier to direct our energies where they ought to go.

And the evolutionary perspective also points to a goal worthy of our energies. There seems to be no question about the fact that over the billions of years of activity on the earth, more and more complex life forms have made their appearance, culminating in the intricacies of the human nervous system. In turn, the cerebral cortex has evolved consciousness, which now envelops the earth as thoroughly as the atmosphere does. The reality of complexification is both an *is* and an *ought*: it has happened—given the conditions ruling the earth, it was bound to happen—but it might not continue unless we wish it to go on. The future of evolution is now in our hands.

In the past few thousand years—a mere split second in evolutionary time—humanity has achieved incredible advances in the *differentiation* of consciousness. We have developed a realization that mankind is separate from other forms of life. We have conceived of individual human beings as separate from one another. We have invented abstraction and analysis—the ability to separate dimensions of objects and processes from each other, such as the velocity of a falling object from its weight and its mass. It is this differentiation that has produced science, technology, and the unprecedented power of mankind to build up and to destroy its environment.

But complexity consists of *integration* as well as differentiation. The task of the next decades and centuries is to realize this underdeveloped component of the mind. Just as we have learned to separate ourselves from each other and from the environment, we now need to learn how to reunite ourselves with other entities around us without losing our hard-won individuality. The most promising faith for the future might be based on the realization that the entire universe is a system related by common laws and that it makes no sense to impose our dreams and desires on nature without taking them into account. Recognizing the limitations of human will, accepting a cooperative rather than a ruling role in the universe, we should feel the relief of the exile who is finally returning home. The problem of meaning will then be resolved as the individual's purpose merges with the universal flow.

NOTES

Pick one entry and write a paragraph on it - your thoughts about it

CHAPTER 1

PAGE

1 **Happiness.** Aristotle's views of happiness are most clearly developed in the *Nicomachean Ethics,* book 1, and book 9, chapters 9 and 10. Contemporary research on happiness by psychologists and other social scientists started relatively late, but has recently begun to catch up with this important topic in earnest. One of the first, and still very influential, works in this field has been Norman Bradburn's *The Structure of Psychological Well-Being* (Bradburn 1969), which pointed out that happiness and unhappiness were independent of each other; in other words, just because a person is happy it does not mean he can't also be unhappy at the same time. Dr. Ruut Veenhoven at the Erasmus University in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, has recently published a *Databook of Happiness* which summarizes 245 surveys conducted in 32 countries between 1911 and 1975 (Veenhoven 1984); a second volume is in preparation. The Archimedes Foundation of Toronto, Canada, has also set as its task the keeping track of investigations of human happiness and well-being; its first directory appeared in 1988. *The Psychology of Happiness,* by the Oxford social psychologist Michael Argyle, was published in 1987. Another comprehensive collection of ideas and research in this area is the volume by Strack, Argyle, & Schwartz (1990).

Undreamed-of material luxuries. Good recent accounts of the conditions of everyday life in past centuries can be found in a series under the general editorship of Philippe Aries and Georges Duby, entitled *A History of Private Life.* The first volume, *From Pagan Rome to Byzantium,* edited by Paul Veyne, was published here in 1987. Another magisterial series on the same topic is Fernand Braudel's *The Structures of Everyday Life,* whose first volume appeared in English in 1981. For the changes in home furnishings, see also Le Roy Ladurie (1979) and Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton (1981).