

A TALK ON THE QUESTION OF THE MEANING OF LIFE

Not many institutions are dealing with the question of the meaning of life. But starting with hope, I began one effort in building a picture of the whole of life so I could see where I fit in. I am finding it a difficult task. In this country, I have been asking a large number of people in universities like Harvard, "Who are your theorists in political science?" "Who are your theorists in social science?" "Nobody!" "What is your theory in psychology?" "There is no theory." It is a very interesting situation. There is no overriding theory within which fragments of human experience can find some kind of relationship with each other. So we have some professors teaching economics, the kind of economics which deals with why there is so much unemployment and inflation in our society. There is a crying need for someone who deals with the question of the meaning of life. People are lost because they don't know where they fit in as an entity in the overall picture. I want to mention two or three movements across the Atlantic, especially in the German-speaking world, in which I am very interested. I am interested mainly because I would like to see some dialogue on meaning of life. There are three names that I would like to throw out to you. I am sure some of you are familiar with some of these, but probably not all.

One of the most important theorists in Germany today is a man by the name of Nicholas Luhmann. He now tries to interpret the whole of reality as a system; a system which can be programmed into a computer in such a way that the computer could give an adequate reflection of what is going on. This is the ambition of a technological mind when it is no longer possible to mirror the whole of reality in human kind, but it is possible to feed all information into the computer and thereby create a picture of reality in terms of what is known as systems analysis. And in systems analysis, the most important thing to know is to see how the circuit is lined-up and what the connections are between the various elements which have been fed into the computer. This is a very difficult operation. That is one way of seeing human existence itself as a system, as a pattern in which variables are related to each other in sets of relationships which can be ultimately revealed by other relations. These are heroic efforts...mostly in touch with what is developing in science and technology. We must not laugh at it, it is an heroic effort. But I don't want to spend too much time on that.

On the other side, there is another man who is well-known in religious circles. That is Hans Gerhard. He has been to this country several times. He has written a very important book called Truth and Method. It is available in English now. His more recent book is Philosophical Rudiments. He has some very new and interesting ways of thinking.

First of all, he would say that what is more important to understand the human being is to understand how he understands, that is the understanding of understanding. How do you say, "Yes, I understand."? What is involved in that process? How do you know or understand. Some very interesting discoveries have been advanced by Gerhard. First, there is no understanding without pre-understanding. There is no knowledge without fore-knowledge. Unless you already know, you do not know that you know. In other words, if I see a contraption like that sitting there and if I had never seen anything like that before, I would not be able to understand it. It's only because I have had some experience with tape recorders and things like that in the past that I can project possibly that it is either a transistor radio or a portable tape recorder and then

project what these ideas are, then ask myself if it is a radio or a tape recorder and come to the conclusion: "Yes, it is either a radio or a tape recorder... or a combination of both." I have to project these three possibilities. But I only know three and what they imply, what each is like and what I can expect. So it is only in terms of the knowledge that I already have that I can understand anything. I can project what is possible onto an object in order to know what it is. Fore-knowledge is the necessary requirement of knowledge.

Now Gerhard plays a very interesting game with this. He also talks about pre-judgement. One makes a judgement of what this could be. "I am / am not judging this to be a banana." I have limited the number of possibilities, and therefore what I have to do more or less is prejudice. And, therefore, Gerhard asserts that all knowledge is based on prejudice. Without prejudice, there is no human knowledge. Whether it is religious or spiritual experience, whether it is structuring reality...all are projected prejudices. But then there are good and bad prejudices. If I had a prejudice that this is a banana, that is not a very good prejudice. I'd have to choose among the possible prejudices. How will I know which is better? Well, there is only one way of doing that--looking at your prejudice--and that is a very difficult operation because it requires three accomplishments. First of all, you must recognize that you have a prejudice. If you don't recognize that, you will never examine your prejudice. It is very important. Recognizing your prejudice is one of the most important elements in understanding understanding. But once you have recognized that you have a prejudice, you must objectify your prejudice. What is the prejudice with which you are looking at reality? Can you put it down so that you can look at it? You must not only recognize the existence of prejudice, you must objectify the prejudice and then you must try to understand your prejudice.

But how do you do that? With the help of another prejudice. You may believe that there is something wrong with your prejudice and you use the prejudice in your mind to examine the nature of your prejudice.

Every prejudice must be constantly looked at and this is what critical rationality really means. Critical rationality is the process of recognizing the existence of prejudices and then finding ways and means of looking at your prejudices. I think Gerhard has a very fascinating new insight.

Gerhard says, "But you don't like that very much." Why is that? Well, he says, "You have a prejudice against prejudices. You don't like prejudices." Why? Because you are all children of the Enlightenment..the rational enlightenment with reason as the most important capacity of the human mind. This tells you that prejudices are wrong; that all knowledge must be without presupposition, without tradition, without authority, without abolishing all objectivity.

Then Gerhard says that enlightenment wanted one to do away with tradition as such, because it was tradition which is behind the authority of the medieval church which held all progress back and therefore the abolition of tradition was the great ambition of the enlightenment. But one now discovers that this is not possible.

All human beings, however much they think they can repudiate tradition, do stand in a tradition. A tradition may be five years old, or maybe ten years old or maybe hundreds of thousands of years old. Each person must understand that he or she has an effective history for which he or she has lived, which in turn are what his or her prejudices are. For example, Culture and language are acquired. You know you don't create your own language. You have to learn it. In the process of picking up a language, you pick up tradition. Not only that, you carry with you a tremendous weight of tradition even in your genes. In your genes is embodied all of the biological development of the human species. Into each person's particular prejudices, one brings one's own effective history. And that history decides what one's horizon is. Not everybody can see the same end. One has a horizon which is largely determined by your tradition. Knowledge and understanding is a continuous dialectic between the tradition which you carry within yourself and the new as it confronts you. A constant dialectic! The tradition itself is changed by coming to terms with the new; understanding the new changes tradition. There is a constant change.

This is a very quick summary of what Hans Gerhard has to say. He has many other things to say...about horizons and the fusing of horizons. But as time does not permit, I will not deal with that.

A third man whom I want to mention to you, and some of you may have heard about him, is Jurian Habermas. He was a professor at the University of Frankfurt in the school of Social Research. He left there to become the expert in the Max Planck Institute for Social Research. Together Carl Frederick Von Weitzaecker and Jurian Habermas set up this institute to think about human existence. It is folding up because of lack of money and other problems.

I would simply say that Habermas has engaged in a dialogue with Gerhard and Luhmann. He picked up some of their central ideas and put them on a basic evolutionary Marxist structure with some critique of Marx, which the Marxists now regard as an enemy.

What is the basic appeal of Habermas? He says that neither Gerhard nor Luhmann take into account the fact that there is a process by which you become a human being. Habermas says that he is talking about humanization which is a now word in our vocabulary. It is a word which has its own origins and is very profound in its meaning. Habermas was the first to propose that a human being is not just manufactured in the mother's womb. A human being becomes a human being by interacting with external reality; and, thereby not only shaping the reality outside but shaping the reality in his or her own mind. We become human beings by interacting with and shaping reality in our minds.

The Marxist theory is upside down when it proposes that it is not in your mind that you shape reality but external reality itself has to be transformed through science and technology. And it is only in the process of a feedback control with things around you and a process of making them useful to you that you become human, e.g. if you give a baby enough food and drink and air and so on, then the growing infant will become a human being. Marx took that as his basis for humanism and humanization. He says that it is the process by which social production is organized which shapes the psyche of a human being. The way in which a society organizes itself in order to produce, whatever technology it has, agricultural technology or a more advanced and modern technology, it has to be organized for production. The way a society is organized is an essential function of the way it works.

Now this is what Habermas criticizes. Thinking of humankind as producers is erroneous. Habermas says there is another area in which humanity functions, and that is the inter-human discussion process by which you arrive at values. That is to say, that you have a continuous dialogue going on in the community or at least in the steering group in the community as to which way the society should go. And it is that process that really makes you a human being. The degree to which you participate in this process of discussing and deciding which way society should go is what makes you a human being.

The other is also necessary, the actual production of things, the organization, the formation of values. So Habermas says there are three levels of becoming a human being :

- 1) actually handling things;
- 2) organizing a political economy and
- 3) creating value knowledge by the process of discussion.

And the capacity of human beings to communicate these values is an essential aspect of being human. Beyond just organizing political economies is talking to each other about what the goals are which society as a whole wishes to reach.

I have given you only one small feature of Habermas' views. But this kind of an attempt to deal with all things in terms of some sort of systematic categories is something which is not taking place very much. Most universities admit that this has no great market right now. In trying to understand what it means to be a human being in holistic terms, these three different views which I have set forth can be criticized and can be questioned and can be changed, but we all must do something of that. At least those who have interest in leading society or in guiding society or in helping society reflect must do some of these things. This is one of my great concerns. I can tell you that I can't even sell it to my colleagues. So if you don't buy it, I won't be offended. People are not really interested. They say that all that is a lot of abstract thinking!

Sometimes I think, however, that as the foundations begin to shake, and the foundations are crumbling now, not shaking, that they may shake and I shall go into despair because we have no time to do the thinking. Or shall we already begin to prepare ourselves for the shaking of the foundations.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Q. We really are an organization which lives in the tension between enabling people to do this, to create this dialogue about the invention of their values and the creation of their society on the one hand. On the other hand, we go back home and pull the models together and then go back again and try. We are very much, at this point, in the midst of a dialogue among ourselves as to which of those two functions we see is the critical edge especially for the next four years. I am very interested that you are stressing the work on holistic models of society. Could you please say another word on why this comes to you as the critical sign of this planet?

A. I think our culture, as we now have it, is one that has been shaped by modern science and technology. It is only slightly over a hundred years since the first science degree was granted in this country. Science and Technology have assumed that human reason without value judgment can achieve objective knowledge... knowledge of things as they are. We have come to a stage where scientists are

recognizing that this is not possible. Human reason cannot, by itself, get a view of reality as it is out there. That possibility is foreclosed ostensibly. The few great assumptions that science gives you through knowledge are to objectify. Science does not give you objective knowledge as any philosopher of science will tell you. It also does not give you full knowledge. Those two claims are false claims. Now, what is the consequence of that? There is a shattering of the underlying value system on which society relies and upon which its technological civilization relies. But we are too insecure to recognize that once you recognize that big shifts will be necessary, and that we are not ready, we have to prepare to make that shift. Science and technology may explain a segment of reality but it can only deal with certain aspect of reality. But in coming to terms with reality you will have to use more than science. That is why I am much concerned that people in my country assume this kind of thing because they have been taught this is the universities.

Q -2 I am very interested in what you said about the "prejudice against prejudice." We certainly find that true in the towns and villages in the world where we do town meetings and projects. I wonder if you could illustrate where you have seen an image change happening. We're very interested in the methods by which image changes take place.

A -2 I would like to refer back to Piaget. Piaget suggests that changes, image changes have to begin in infancy. Before you're three years of age. It is very difficult to change our own image structures. Essential changes must begin at very young ages. That is why the basic structures of conceptual thinking are required. We know now that the kind of pictures and works of art a child is exposed to are deciding already the shape of mind of the child. That is our problem. Change must begin at the infant level, by changing our system of acculturation of the society. All these things must be changed. But I do not think this change can be made by preaching. You can't preach to a three year old. You must find some other way.