

# Major Philosophical Issues of the Modern Age

*A consideration of some of the things  
that trouble us most in our most thoughtful moments today*

*by Theodore M. Greene*

THE THINGS THAT TROUBLE US most in our most thoughtful moments today tend to relate themselves to each other; they have a common core and a common base; they are facets of a deep central concern. What is this concern? My answer may puzzle you. I think it is the problem of human existence.

Your immediate response may be, "For heaven's sake, what do you mean by the *problem* of human existence? We exist while we live, and when we die we cease to exist. Where is the problem?" You might go on, in criticism of my suggestion, by saying that, in one sense, man has always worried about how to stay alive, and that therefore our desire to stay alive is perennial, not new.

We today, in this fortunate land of ours, are indeed acutely aware of the danger of modern technology—that is, of possible wholesale annihilation. This is one contemporary problem of survival, but this is not the

problem I have in mind when I speak of the problem of human existence.

Men have not always only wished to survive—to keep alive; they have tried to live well, to have as many of the good things of life as possible. We today, in this country, are also interested in the good life—the physical comfort, sensuous satisfaction, æsthetic delight, athletic excitement, sex, food, the satisfaction of intellectual curiosity—in short, everything that might be included under the large rubric of "culture." We too concern ourselves about political questions and prize our freedoms. We too discuss our economic problems and prize our high standard of living. We too cultivate our enjoyments. But the problem of how to attain these values is the cultural problem of human welfare rather than the more basic problem which I have labelled the "problem of existence."

If this problem of existence is not the problem of survival and not the problem of welfare, what is it? We are today asking ourselves with unusual anxiety questions that undercut these questions of survival and welfare. In our more thoughtful moments we tend to

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ask ourselves not merely. “How can I survive?” but “*Why* should I survive at all?” We ask ourselves not. “How can I get this, that or the other value?” but (in our more thoughtful and anxious moments), “What real value do these values which my society and I value really have? Aren’t these all pipe dreams? Are not all our Western values merely subjectively or socially conditioned prejudices to which we are all prone but which, when we really come to examine them, won’t stand examination?”

You remember the famous lines from *Hamlet*: “To be, or not to be: that is the question . . . To die, to sleep: No more; and by a sleep to say we end the heartache . . . ’Tis a consummation devoutly to be wished.”

Here the Prince of Denmark, able, young, and in good health, is so bedeviled by his problems that, for the time being at least, he can’t face life. “How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable,” he cries, “seem to me all the uses of this world.” You will also recall his eloquent expression of the logical outcome of what we today call naturalistic reductionism: “What is a man, if his chief good and market of his time be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.”

All of you will have heard, and some of you may seriously have defended the proposition that, when you get right down to it, man is nothing but a very complicated kind of animal. It was this reductionism that led Shakespeare to declare that life, so conceived, is “full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

Shakespeare was prophetic in the lines which I have just quoted. Life itself has become a problem for us, or, to put it somewhat differently, we have become a problem to ourselves. We don’t understand ourselves; we don’t know how to figure out the wherefore and why of human life, though we are learning more and more about the *what* of human life. This bafflement gives rise (usually inarticulately) to our sense of deep anxiety, frustration and anguish. It is this, I submit, that constitutes the central, cultural, spiritual problem of our time.

I think I can anticipate your immediate reaction, “What a fantastic thing to say! Wouldn’t you expect that from a philosopher! Isn’t this just a case of abnormal misanthropy issuing from an unhealthy brooding of a neurotic soul?”

You may be right, but you must admit that I am one of very many who feel this way today. Most of the sensitive poets, novelists, artists, theologians and philosophers of our time are distraught by this anxiety.

It may seem to you to be very strange that I should talk this way—of all places, in America, whose culture is the most prosperous the world has ever known, and here at Caltech, located in the most prosperous city in the most prosperous part of the most prosperous state of the Union. Isn’t “America” practically synonymous with prosperity, power, scientific and technological advance and political freedom? Have men ever had it as good as we have it? Aren’t we all healthy, successful and happy? True, we have a few minor problems such as the possibility of wholesale annihilation and an indefinite armament race, mounting racial tension and widespread international unrest. Still, need we healthy, optimistic Americans, supporting our local Optimists Clubs, worry our heads over these transient problems? Surely, we have what it takes!

That is a question. *Do* we have what it takes? What does “it” refer to? What have we got to face?

This at least is clear—that we cannot merely live our own lives, individually; or merely in small self-sufficient groups; or even in larger self-contained groups. What we have to face is *life* in our total, social, global, natural, cosmic environment. Our human nature is what it is; and we are living in an actual total universe, whatever its nature may be. These two factors constitute our problem and we are slapped down *hard* whenever we make a mistake in assessing ourselves and our universe. We are also duly rewarded when we assess ourselves and our universe wisely and when we act accordingly.

What then does reality, subjective and objective, demand of us? What does “life” demand of us? What will life slap us down for if we don’t rise to its challenge?

Our answer to this question will depend upon three variables. We have different objectives, and our answer will depend in part upon our objectives—what we expect of life. It will depend in part upon our view of the universe of which we are a part. And it will depend in part upon our own estimate of ourselves as human beings. As we know, when we have three variables to manipulate we can get a large number of combinations.

Let me give you one or two examples. Suppose we are old-fashioned enough to expound, in 1957, a strictly mechanistic view of reality and man. This view has now become largely outmoded, but it is still held in some quarters. It implies a kind of fatalism which asserts that thought—taking thought—makes no difference. If you really accept this view it will dictate a distinctive answer to the question, "What does it take?"—namely, that everything we do and are is wholly and rigidly determined by our heredity and environment and that we, as moral agents, have no real responsibility for our actions.

Suppose, alternatively, that we do not accept this mechanistic determinism. Suppose that we believe that, somehow, taking thought *does* make a difference, that it is possible to select and work for meaningful goals and that man as a moral agent can and should seek such goals. This belief will force us to conclude that despite all hereditary and environmental influences we are somehow genuinely free and responsible as human beings.

### A perennial unsolved problem

What then do we mean by "freedom" and "responsibility"? This is one of the perennial unsolved problems which thoughtful, morally sensitive people have tried to solve for centuries. I *feel* free; I act *as though* I were free; I treat other people *as though* they were free—and yet, when I try to answer the question, "How, precisely, is such a thing possible?" I feel that it is very hard to find a satisfactory answer. This is the puzzled state of mind in which many thoughtful people find themselves today, and their bewilderment is often a source of acute anxiety.

Or again, if we believe that taking thought does make a difference, we can presumably deliberate upon, and select, the objectives or values which we shall strive to realize. This implies that some goals or values are superior to others. And this, in turn, implies that values are in some meaningful sense "objective" and "real"; that we can more or less adequately apprehend them; and that it is important to try to discover and actualize them.

Yet, in philosophy as well as in the social sciences, the prevalent tendency in recent years has been to *reduce* all values to the status of *mere* socially, culturally and individually conditioned prejudices. Men have tended to deny that there are such things as objective values in any significant sense, and therefore to deny the very possibility of authentic value insights. They have the possibility of real scientific insight, but the claim that moral, aesthetic and religious insights are also possible has been widely challenged and often repudiated.

I. A. Richards, the distinguished British student of literature and language at Harvard, has for years been preaching this doctrine. Values, he has insisted, *merely* reflect man's subjective, socially conditioned, irrational prejudices which, in turn, can be expressed *only* in emotive utterance. We merely prefer this or that to something else, and there is in principle no way of deciding

whether *any* human preference is right or wrong. Nothing is in itself good or bad, beautiful or ugly. This is the position of normative nihilism; there *are* no objective values; all we have are irrational, indefensible, subjective and social preferences or evaluations.

Some years ago, while I was still at Princeton, Bertrand Russell visited us and gave us one of his characteristically brilliant and witty lectures, followed by a discussion. During this discussion we said to him, "Mr. Russell, do you believe in democracy?"

"Why, of course, I do."

"Do you really believe that democracy is valuable?"

"Well, I like it. I prefer it."

"Do you think that democracy is superior to communism?"

"What do you mean by 'superior'?"

"Do you mean that your preference for democracy is purely an irrational preference?"

"Why, of course."

"Then why do you go around lecturing and writing in defense of democracy?"

"Because I prefer to have other people share my prejudices."

"Then you are not arguing in defense of democracy?"

"Of course not. It is impossible to argue rationally in support of any value."

"Then you are merely indulging in emotive utterance?"

"Why, of course."

"But suppose somebody else emotes louder and more effectively than you do—then what?"

"All you can do is to try to hit them over the head before they hit you."

### A symptomatic man

What impresses me in all this is the extraordinary disparity between Bertrand Russell's philosophy and his actual behavior. He has lived and suffered, worked and fought for values all his life; yet, as a philosopher, he has developed a philosophy that makes all values, including his own, utterly nonsensical. What sense is there in that kind of philosophy? Yet, if I were a sociologist, I would write a chapter on Bertrand Russell as a man who is very symptomatic of our age. He has expressed very eloquently the corrosive doubt, so widespread today, in the reality or objectivity of all the values our Western culture has developed and cherished for centuries.

Let us push this analysis one step further. Suppose I were to say to you that I had quite an experience crossing your campus just now—that I heard a noise in the bushes, and, on investigation, discovered a couple of Caltech boys beating a small child to death with obvious satisfaction. Why would we be profoundly shocked by such an occurrence?—because we still believe that all life is precious, and that human life has an intrinsic value and dignity. This belief has come to us from our Western culture, partly from the ancient Greeks, but chiefly from our Hebraic-Christian tradition.

The characteristically religious way in which this belief has been expressed has been that all men are beings of intrinsic worth because they are children of God. Since the Renaissance, God has become increasingly incredible, nebulous and unimportant; but we have continued to assert the humane conclusion while discarding the theological premise. We still like to think of ourselves as brothers, one to another, and we still try to respect one another even in the absence of a beneficent Father.

Yet, how deeply rooted in our culture and in our hearts today is this conviction that each of us is a being of infinite intrinsic value? Can we really believe that, in a hostile or a neutral universe, man is allowed to exist, with intrinsic value, to flourish on this earth until he is permanently snuffed out? If so, is this not a belief in the miraculous emergence of human value out of a valueless cosmos? What could be more fantastic than that man should have real intrinsic value in a universe that knows nothing whatsoever of value!

### A basis for anxiety

When I stated my theme at the beginning of this talk it may well have sounded very implausible. Yet, when we raise these specific questions regarding freedom and responsibility, value and human dignity in our universe, our anxiety regarding the ultimate meaning and value of existence appears to be not unfounded. In our thoughtful moments we are profoundly puzzled and uncertain regarding our freedom and our human value; we are also increasingly persuaded that our universe itself is meaningless and valueless. How long can doubts of this magnitude persist without driving us to the desperate conclusion that all human life is ultimately absurd, as Sartre believes; or even obscene, as Celine insists?

I repeat: Our greatest cultural problem today is expressed in the question, "What, in the light of our dominant beliefs and disbeliefs, can we make of our lives?" This is the main concern of many of our leading writers—men like Kafka in his novels *The Trial* and *The Castle*; or Camus, who recently received the Nobel prize; or Celine; or Sartre, who feels that the harder you look at life honestly, the more you are filled with nausea—the title of one of his novels; or O'Neill, who strove mightily to find some answer to the enigma of life and died without having found it; or Faulkner, who comes pretty close to saying, in his most optimistic moments, "They endure"—referring chiefly to ignorant religiously-benighted negroes.

We find the same concern expressed, in one way or another, in modern music and painting and in much current philosophy and theology. This, I submit, is the central problem of our age; I do not believe that only a few "intellectuals," eggheads or æsthetic freaks feel this way.

I have been teaching for some 35 years and have been in close touch with undergraduates all that time. The change in the climate of opinion among thoughtful undergraduates during this 35-year period is very marked.

Many thoughtful undergraduates today echo this same anxiety or distress. So does the thoughtful businessman or member of one of our leading professions. It is more eloquently true of juvenile delinquents and of the increasing number of psychiatric patients who are pouring into our mental hospitals. True, we Americans are prosperous, comfortable, and apparently happy—but we don't have much zest for life. We are too puzzled about ourselves and our human destiny to enjoy a sense of real assurance and peace.

If I am right in my cultural diagnosis, this deep and pervasive anxiety gives rise, in turn, to widespread secondary symptoms. Contemporary superstitions are a case in point. The *Los Angeles Times* runs a column on astrology every day, and many businessmen, I am told, will not sign a crucial contract without consulting their astrologer.

This same basic anxiety reflects itself, very differently, in our vacillating foreign policy and in our attitude toward suffering humanity in other lands. We loudly proclaim our respect for all human life and welfare, yet we spend millions of dollars storing our surplus food while millions of people in India and elsewhere are literally starving to death. This goes on year after year, yet we Americans are only mildly uneasy. If we can have really deep moral convictions regarding the basic values we talk about, would we allow this to happen?

### Racial tensions

Or again, what underlies our current racial tensions? Why is it that so many white Christians in predominantly negro communities find it almost impossible to take a strong stand for desegregation? Are we not pusillanimous because we have lost our deep basic convictions in this area of moral and social justice?

Or, as a final illustration of our cultural malaise, we love to talk about the importance of education, and liberal education, in our democracy. Yet, as a matter of fact, we are spending far more money on liquor and tobacco and gadgets than we are on education. Education in science is likely to receive more support during the next few years, but what likelihood is there that liberal education, and particularly education in basic human values, will receive the corresponding support which is so desperately needed?

Can there be any serious question that our greatest need today is normative, is the field of values and goals? You scientists have made us supreme in science and technology; thanks to you we still lead the world in this important area. But do we lead the world in significant democracy? How strong is our respect for human life, our passion for moral decency and justice? This is the question mankind is asking, and we betray our grave doubts and deep anxieties regarding the problem of existence by our uncertain and ambiguous answer.

You will note that I have not offered any solution to this problem. I did not promise to do so, but I should at least indicate the direction in which I think we must

look and strive to cure ourselves of these ills. I'll have to state my case very briefly, at the risk of sounding dogmatic.

I would start with the major premise that no man has ever solved his problems by withdrawing from life, and that no community has ever achieved or maintained its cultural vitality by adopting an escapist attitude. We are essentially dependent upon one another; we are all subject to the same cosmic laws, physical and spiritual. Unless we learn how to live with our fellow men and our universe, we are bound to warp our own private lives and impair our corporate welfare.

## Healthy relationships

*I am also deeply impressed by the truth of the Biblical insistence that "He that would save his soul will lose it." The answer to the problem of existence is not individual or collective egoism. The answer must be sought in the direction of re-establishing a more healthy relation with our fellow men, with the world of nature, and with whatever ultimate mysterious forces may be operative in our universe.*

In the Middle Ages, at their cultural best, it was generally assumed that there was a God of righteousness and love, that this God was more or less knowable, and that man could therefore significantly relate himself to God. Authentic, honest reverence for the Deity was still possible, though there were, of course, a great many people who fell short of such reverence. It was therefore much easier for men to respect one another as the sons of God, created in His image. Human respect was still a valid ideal, even if it was not always practiced. It was also possible for men in the later Middle Ages to respect and commune with nature, to feel for nature what came in the 17th and 18th centuries to be referred to as "natural piety." So long as man could live in a community in which reverence for God, respect for man and natural piety prevailed, it was easier for him to relate himself significantly to God, nature and man. He could live his life within an assurance of belief and be confident in the possibility of living a meaningful life on earth.

What happened historically was that at the end of the Middle Ages, despite the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, significant religious faith became increasingly difficult. Then, with the advent of modern science and technology, as nature came to be better understood, nature was first progressively mastered and then exploited. And the more nature was exploited, the more was man tempted to lose his respect for it; natural piety became increasingly difficult and rare. In the 19th century, as the social sciences began to imitate the natural sciences in their study of man, man himself came to be regarded as part of nature and therefore (witness high pressure advertising today) as available for predatory exploitation. As a result, it is very hard for us today to find anything in the universe which we can honestly reverence, to find any reason why we should really re-

spect one another or ourselves, or to respect and commune with nature.

We must therefore try to re-establish, somehow—not in medieval terms, but in mid-20th-century terms—a significant working relation with whatever is objectively real *and* valuable or meaningful in ourselves and in our universe. This is the difficult task which faces us. It demands of us all the intellectual and spiritual integrity, all the realism and honesty and humility we can muster. Above all, it requires of us an attitude of reflective commitment or critical belief.

Only the uninformed believe that anything significant can be proved to the hilt, either in science or in the field of values. We are surrounded by mystery; life is, inevitably, a gamble. We must live by faith. Our only option is to rely on a faith that is crude, superstitious and uninformed, or to achieve a faith that is critical, reflective and more or less informed. Our chief concern should therefore be to cultivate the art of reflective and critical commitment in every walk of life and area of belief. This, of course, requires individual effort, but such effort will not suffice. No significant advance in human culture has ever been brought about by a single individual working in isolation. It is the confraternity of scientists that has slowly built up the mountain ranges of science which, in turn, have made possible the peaks of distinguished individual scientific discovery. The most brilliant of scientists would be helpless without the continuing tradition of cooperative scientific endeavor. The same is true in art and literature, in the social sciences, and in history, philosophy and religion.

## The sense of community

We must therefore find a way of banding ourselves together in corporate endeavor in every area of common concern. We must try to visualize common goals, devise methods of effective cooperation, and develop adequate languages for self-expression and communication in art as well as in science, in the fields of moral endeavor and religious quest as well as in social and political reform. We must strive to recapture the sense of community, to build interlocking communities—stable yet flexible, rooted in tradition yet progressive and creative, socially oriented yet congenial to responsible individual freedom.

This is no easy task. Our future as a culture, and therefore our individual futures as individuals, are precarious. We are not bound to succeed, but neither are we doomed to fail. Our "problem of existence" is not insoluble. We can, if we are wise and courageous enough to do so, benefit from our existential anxieties. We can achieve through them a deeper and more honest understanding of ourselves and one another, of nature and our cosmos. Such growing maturity, in turn, can enable us to achieve an idealistic realism and a reflective faith sufficient to enable us to revitalize our culture and to render our individual lives meaningful and useful. This is our task in a period of cultural crisis.