

MAN IN CRISIS

PERSPECTIVES ON THE INDIVIDUAL
AND HIS WORLD

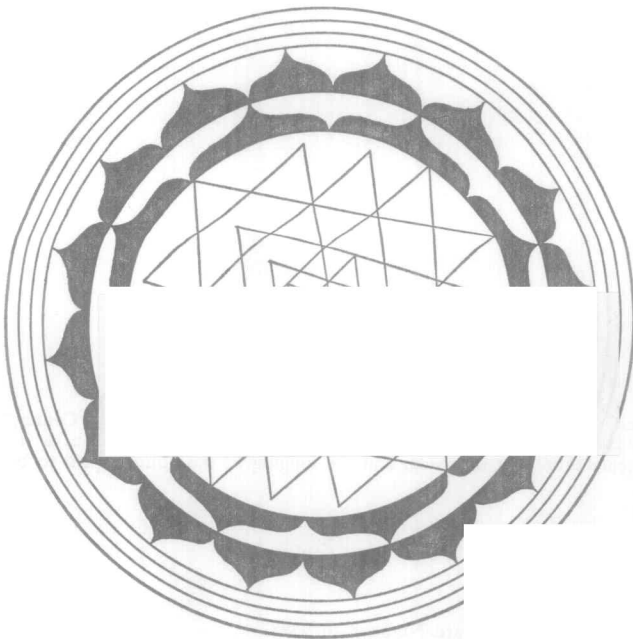


MAN IN CRISIS

PERSPECTIVES ON THE INDIVIDUAL
AND HIS WORLD

JOSEPH K. DAVIS

Georgia State University



Scott, Foresman and Company

The cover design features a *mandala* figure. Known as the “expanding Center,” the mandala has traditionally been used as an aid for concentration and contemplation, as it symbolizes the struggle to create order out of chaos, and the longing of the human spirit to be reunited with the divine.

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Preface

Man in Crisis has essentially only one academic aim: to provide readings for discussion and composition. Accordingly, selections reflect a variety of subjects and written styles, with diversity and contrast in both approach and content. This volume contains materials that stress authoritative treatment of provocative, timely issues—from religious belief and politics to self-alienation and existentialism. Unlike some readers, *Man in Crisis* is not organized with a view to specific assignments, questions, or rhetorical aides to writing. The emphasis throughout is on content, relying upon the judgment of the instructor and the interests of the students to promote the usefulness of the materials within their own program of composition.

The informing theme of the anthology is “man in crisis”—a phrase suggesting the argumentative and perhaps the controversial nature of the ideas contained within these selections. Many of the authors and pieces included are familiar ones; some appear for the first time in a reader designed for college composition. Yet each selection focuses upon significant issues and current problems, relevant for those in the natural and the social sciences as well as for those in the fine arts and the humanities. By choosing “man in crisis” as the rationale of an anthology for college writers, the editor wishes to stress the close relationship between content and personal involvement in critical thinking and writing. This reader insists that students *begin* with content, idea, and argument; skill in analysis, structure, and style may then be developed.

The editorial intention of *Man in Crisis* promotes no single philosophy or partisan interpretation of ideas. Instructors and students may use selections in any way they choose, reading pieces here and there throughout the anthology. Similarly, they may contrast and compare ideas and written per-

formances in any fashion which serves their purpose. The selections speak for themselves and any consideration ought to be on the merits of each piece. Yet the idea of crisis suggests more than a structural framework for the volume. Although interpretation and emphasis given an essay, or essays, depend finally upon the individual reader, the point of view of the editor is not entirely objective. By his arrangement and introductory remarks, the editor hopes to encourage students to recognize that, to one degree or another, the ten "crisis" problems of this reader continue to be questions for the individual and his world. The editor believes that the best stimulus for thinking and writing is a genuine interest in man and his struggles with timeless problems and with the meaning of personal experiences.

In organization and approach, the collection is unified by the theme, "man in crisis," and each of the forty-one selections is presented in terms of ten "crisis problems" related to such subjects as love and war, art and education. Each of the ten sections, moreover, is introduced by the editor in a twofold manner: first, a short description of the crisis problem and its pertinent aspects; then, a brief statement about each of the four authors, relating his particular contribution to the theme of the section. Editorial comments have the additional function of giving focus to the material and supplying information that will assist students in reading perceptively and critically. When necessary, explanatory footnotes and other material are included and are identified thus: [Ed.]. All others belong to the selection itself.

Joseph K. Davis
Atlanta, Georgia

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The Crisis of Knowledge

INTRODUCTION

Early in the seventeenth century Francis Bacon observed, "Knowledge is power." The evolution of Western culture since the Renaissance has proved him correct. So enormous has been the role of knowledge in making our culture possible that today the entire world seems to be imitating and adapting Western styles of thinking and doing. Our knowledge has given us great power. If we inquire into the nature and extent of the knowledge available to twentieth-century man, we find that it is impossible for a single individual to grasp its dimensions, much less to study all of its content. Yet it is possible to gain some insight into the basic nature of Western culture if we consider its knowledge as a "system"—as an interrelated pattern of information, ideas, and attitudes.

As a system knowledge has, in one sense, a basis in our practical lives and in the views we hold about life, the world, and ourselves; it is a way of measuring and understanding our experiences and thoughts. In another sense, knowledge suggests much more than information or experiences; it provides a means of articulating and realizing our hopes and ideals—and thus of reaching for, and sometimes achieving, high moments of human existence. To say that we are what we know is perhaps to go too far in statement, but certainly some insight into the general content and modes of the body of knowledge we collectively possess helps clarify basic aspects of ourselves and the culture in which we live.

What, then, do we in the twentieth century know and, more to the point, how do we know what we claim to know? These are questions of *epistemology*—the theory or science of knowledge—and they are particularly important ones for us today, for we often hear disturbing questions asked about the limits and validity of knowledge and the methods employed to establish the true and the real. Fundamental assumptions about such issues as God and man, faith and reason, matter and energy are continually being reexamined and frequently challenged. The four essays which follow were chosen because

they illustrate certain features of Western knowledge and the ways in which outstanding men met these enduring questions. As with many who have struggled with the basic issues of knowledge, the efforts of these four men afford excellent insights into key assumptions which have shaped the Western way of thinking and knowing.

José Ortega y Gasset

The selection "History as a System" (1941) is drawn from the monograph of the same name by the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset (1883–1955). The portion reprinted here considers two interrelated aspects of Western man's system of knowledge: (1) how man is essentially a "knower" and a decision-making creature, gifted with life but not restricted to one preordained structure in terms of which to exercise his individual actions or his views of himself and his environment; and (2) how the ideas of Western man from roughly 1650 forward have been the result of a faith in reason and in the rational order of this world. If, as Ortega argues, what men know can be analyzed for what is their personal system of beliefs, then the critical period for Western culture was the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries, when Europe witnessed the loss of its unifying faith in God and developed a new faith based on the efficacy of man's reason. After this time, the belief grew that the nature and order of this world were problems which reason could solve.

Blaise Pascal

In *Last Remarks on the "Thoughts" of M. Pascal*, French philosopher Voltaire exclaimed: "What light has burst over Europe within the last few years! It first illuminated almost all the princes of the North; it has even come into the Universities. It is the light of common sense." The "light of common sense" to which Voltaire alludes was, of course, reason and the new knowledge it had made possible. Voltaire's enthusiasm for the enlightening powers of reason was not shared by Blaise Pascal (1623–1662). As natural scientist (Pascal's Law) and mathematician (studies in probabilities), Pascal had contributed to the new scientific age to which Voltaire belonged. As an individual with a strong faith in Christianity, however, he viewed the possible triumph of reason with serious misgivings. Pascal felt that the ever widening gulf between the intellectual and the spiritual needs of man endangered not only the truths of learning but also the progress of culture. His convictions on the separate functions of faith and reason are preserved in an unfinished project on the evidences of religion, collected by his friends after his death and published as *Pensées de M. Pascal sur la Religion et sur quelques autres sujets* (1670). Commonly referred to as *Pensées (Thoughts)*, the work makes clear

Pascal's view that "the heart has its reasons, which reason does not know." As he saw it, the problem of knowledge could only be solved by grasping the twofold aspects of human existence; namely, the physical and ephemeral—known by reason, and the spiritual and eternal—known by faith. Both kinds of knowledge, Pascal believed, are indispensable to man's existence.

John Locke

The triumph of rationalism among the intellectuals in the eighteenth century, and indeed the continuing dominance of rationalistic approaches to knowledge, owe a heavy debt to English philosopher John Locke (1632–1704). His *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) is considered one of the early definitive works for the philosophy of empiricism. Book IV of the *Essay*—from which most of the following excerpts are taken—presents the rationalists' point of view on the crisis between faith and reason. Locke's statements may be read historically as a comment on the movement toward rationalism in religion, but they suggest more than issues in a controversy among religious sects in the seventeenth century. His arguments set forth principles of learning and knowledge still used in the continuing debate over how we know what we know and how in the learning process we discover truth and avoid falsehood. The way in which Locke would establish reason as the sole judge of all knowledge, including that derived from "revelation," is particularly relevant to the question of how we measure and understand ideas and experiences.

Max Planck

Subtle and complex in its influences on the development of Western culture, science today confronts us with a body of knowledge that is difficult to comprehend. In fact, knowledge itself has come more and more to mean that which is "scientific." (The English word *science* comes from the Latin *scientia*, "knowing"; thus, "to know" suggests etymologically to be "scientific.") Because modern science and its dazzling auxiliary technologies support, if they do not actually condition, the predominate way of thinking and knowing in Western culture, it is well to consider its principles and goals. One statement on this subject is that given by the German physicist Max Planck (1858–1947). A Nobel Prize winner (1918) for work in quantum theory, Planck is concerned in his nontechnical writing with clarifying for general audiences what are—as the title of the essay states—"The Meaning and Limits of Exact Science" (1941). Especially interesting is Planck's belief that "exact science" attempts to approximate in terms of the prevailing "world picture" the "metaphysical reality behind everything that human experience shows to be real." For Planck, then, science becomes a "standard" and a way of measuring knowledge—not a means of discovering truth itself, if truth is understood to embody the idea of "that which always is."

JOSÉ ORTEGA Y GASSET

History as a System

I

Human life is a strange reality concerning which the first thing to be said is that it is the basic reality, in the sense that to it we must refer all others, since all others, effective or presumptive, must in one way or another appear within it.

The most trivial and at the same time the most important note in human life is that man has no choice but to be always doing something to keep himself in existence. Life is given to us; we do not give it to ourselves, rather we find ourselves in it, suddenly and without knowing how. But the life which is given us is not given us ready-made; we must make it for ourselves, each one his own. Life is a task. And the weightiest aspect of these tasks in which life consists is not the necessity of performing them but, in a sense, the opposite: I mean that we find ourselves always under compulsion to do something but never, strictly speaking, under compulsion to do something in particular, that there is not imposed on us this or that task as there is imposed on the star its course or on the stone its gravitation. Each individual before doing anything must decide for himself and at his own risk what he is going to do. But this decision is impossible unless one possesses certain convictions concerning the nature of things around one, the nature of other men, of oneself. Only in the light of such convictions can one prefer one act to another, can one, in short, live.

It follows that man must ever be grounded on some belief, and that the structure of his life will depend primordially on the beliefs on which he is grounded; and further that the most decisive changes in humanity are changes of belief, the intensifying or weakening of beliefs. The diagnosis of any human existence, whether of an individual, a people, or an age, must begin by establishing the repertory of its convictions. For always in living one sets out from certain convictions. They are the ground beneath our feet, and it is for this reason we say that man is grounded on them. It is man's beliefs that truly constitute his state. I have spoken of them as a repertory to indicate that the

plurality of beliefs on which an individual, a people, or an age is grounded never possesses a completely logical articulation, that is to say, does not form a system of ideas such as, for example, a philosophy constitutes or aims at constituting. The beliefs that coexist in any human life, sustaining, impelling, and directing it, are on occasion incongruous, contradictory, at the least confused. Be it noted that all these qualifications attach to beliefs in so far as they partake of ideas. But it is erroneous to define belief as an idea. Once an idea has been thought it has exhausted its role and its consistency. The individual, moreover, may think whatever the whim suggests to him, and even many things against his whim. Thoughts arise in the mind spontaneously, without will or deliberation on our part and without producing any effect whatever on our behavior. A belief is not merely an idea that is thought, it is an idea in which one also believes. And believing is not an operation of the intellectual mechanism, but a function of the living being as such, the function of guiding his conduct, his performance of his task.

This observation once made, I can now withdraw my previous expression and say that beliefs, a mere incoherent repertory in so far as they are merely ideas, always constitute a system in so far as they are effective beliefs; in other words, that while lacking articulation from the logical or strictly intellectual point of view, they do nonetheless possess a vital articulation, they *function* as beliefs resting one on another, combining with one another to form a whole: in short, that they always present themselves as members of an organism, of a structure. This causes them among other things always to possess their own architecture and to function as a hierarchy. In every human life there are beliefs that are basic, fundamental, radical, and there are others derived from these, upheld by them, and secondary to them. If this observation is supremely trivial, the fault is not mine that with all its triviality it remains of the greatest importance. For should the beliefs by which one lives lack structure, since their number in each individual life is legion there must result a mere pullulation hostile to all idea of order and incomprehensible in consequence.

The fact that we should see them, on the contrary, as endowed with a structure and a hierarchy allows us to penetrate their hidden order and consequently to understand our own life and the life of others, that of today and that of other days.

Thus we may now say that the diagnosing of any human existence, whether of an individual, a people, or an age, must begin by an ordered inventory of its system of convictions, and to this end it must establish before all else which belief is fundamental, decisive, sustaining and breathing life into all the others.

Now in order to determine the state of one's beliefs at a given moment the only method we possess is that of comparing this moment with one or more other moments. The more numerous the terms of comparison the more exact will be the result—another banal observation whose far-reaching consequences will emerge suddenly at the end of this meditation.