

Modern Civilization and the Environment¹

by *E. Maynard Adams*

Human beings have two sets of needs: those which can be satisfied by manipulatory action on and utilization of the environment; and those which require an affectionate embrace of, acceptance by, cooperation with, and submission to our world in a symbiotic relationship. The first set, which we may call “materialistic,” generates the drive for power as a generalized means of action. When this set becomes dominant, our attitude toward the world is that of conqueror and master. From within this perspective, we recognize only factual limitations on our will. And so we seek to develop and to advance the kind of knowledge that will give us power to overcome or to push back such obstructions. The attitude engendered by the second set of needs, which we may call “humanistic,” is that of one who recognizes not only that one’s existence imposes requirements on one’s environment but also that one’s environment has its own inherent directedness and normative structure in which one is involved in such a way that it imposes not only factual limitations on one’s will, but also normative restraints and requirements as well. From within this perspective we experience our world as one in which we have a place, not just in the sense of a space-time location, but in a normative sense—a place where we belong, where we are at home, a place involving responsibilities, rights and privileges, a place in which we are nurtured and supported by our world. In this stance, one has a sense of not living by one’s will alone, not even in compromise with the wills of others, but with the support of and in cooperation with the socio-ecological system generated and sustained by the larger Universe.

Our modern culture and social institutions have been generated largely by the first set of needs, for they have become our dominant concerns. Modern people approach their world as conquerors and masters. The civilization we have built is an expression of this orientation. Even our conception of knowledge and our view of reality have been shaped by it.

¹ This is a revised version of a paper presented at a conference on the environment at Florida State University in the 1970s. Not previously published.

It was this new approach and conception of things that gave rise to the seventeenth and eighteenth century Enlightenment and our modern era of “progress.” It has produced marvelous advances in science and technology and improvements in the material conditions of our existence. The advancement of medical science and the improvement of economic conditions have greatly lowered the mortality rate. Scientific agriculture has made urbanization and industrialization possible. The harnessing of physical energy through science and technology has replaced muscle power and is now replacing mental power. We have exceeded even the fondest hopes of the Enlightenment apostles of progress. Yet we are becoming increasingly aware that what we have achieved is no Utopia.

In seeking to impose our will on our environment, we have recognized only its factual structures; indeed we have denied that others exist. Yet there is a sense in which the terrarium in which we live seems to have an inherent normative structure of its own. It can be said to be well and healthy, or sick and dying. There are natural processes that work to restore and to maintain its health. But exploitation of our environment for our own purposes without regard for the normative structure of the biosphere and the requirements and restraints that it imposes on us may result in the death of our blue planet, in the reduction of it to a purely physical system. Indeed, there are those who think that, with the impairment of the ozone layer, the poisoning of our land and waters, and the pollution and heating of the atmosphere, we may have already passed the critical point beyond which recovery is difficult, if not impossible. Certainly these are danger signals that we dare not ignore.

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But there are two ways in which we can respond. One is our typically modern way of approaching any problem: We may see the dangers of which I speak as simply further factual limitations on our will to be overcome and mastered by still more advances in science and technology; or we may reorient ourselves toward the world in such a way that we recognize ourselves as having a normative place, according to which we must live in a continuing symbiotic relationship with other living things within the value structure of the terrarium. This, of course, would not exclude the advancement of science and technology, nor its desirability, but it would affect how we would use the manipulatory power they make available. We

would in some respects submit to and accept the requirements of our environment and cooperate in their fulfillment; in other respects, we would continue to overcome and to master the purely factual limitations on our will. But our basic relationship with and response to the world about us would be radically different.

This might prove to be of great significance for the spirit with which we live as well as for our continued biological existence, for our modern stance toward the world and the civilization it has generated not only threaten the biosphere but promise to destroy the conditions that support the human spirit even if the biosphere is saved.

Human beings live and have a place not only in the biosphere but also in a socio-cultural environment. A person has to be not only biologically generated and sustained but also culturally generated and nourished within a historical community. Otherwise one would never acquire the semantic and knowledge-yielding powers and the self-conception and understanding that make one a *human being*—that is, a social being who lives in an intersubjective world of shared experiences, thought, and actions; a being with a sense of history and foreknowledge of the future; a rational agent who acts under the guidance of knowledge; a moral agent with a sense of what is fitting and unfitting for one to be and to do as a human being; a being who expresses one's life and depicts one's world in works of art; and a religious being with an attitudinal response to oneself as a human being in the world.

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To be a human being, to be one with these powers (or with the potential for them, or to be one for whom the lack of such a potential is a privation or defect), one's natural semantic powers of experience, memory, and imagination must be extended (or subject to being extended, or defective if not subject to being extended) by the semantic tools of a language and other cultural symbols. Furthermore, to be a human being one must share (or be subject to sharing, or defective to the extent one is not subject to sharing) in the accumulated knowledge and wisdom of a

historical community. Society and culture are as essential for personhood as the biosphere is for one's biological existence.

Physical, organic, and social systems form a hierarchy of increasing categorial complexity. A physical system is categorially one-dimensional.² It has only a factual structure. It consists of things and the properties and relations existent in them. What distinguishes an organic system categorially from a purely physical one is an inherent value structure. There is the matter of what ought to be and the way things ought to be in an organism over and above what things there are in themselves and the way they are in themselves. We conceive the elements of an organism in terms of their functions, in terms of what they exist to do, and we think of their factual structures as fitted to their functions. So we have logical room to talk about health and disease, malfunction, and malformation of an organism. Of course, biologists, operating from within our modern stance toward the world, try to deny the categorial difference between the two kinds of systems; but they have, I think, a restricted perspective that brings into view only the factual structure of things.

A social system differs from an organic one in that the dimension of meaning is added. Here I am talking about semantic as distinct from existential presence. Something may be present in its factual existence, like the desk on which I wrote this paper; or it may be semantically present, like the desk's being in my view, in my dream, in this paper, or in your thought, now that I have mentioned it. A social position or role, like an organ in an organism, is constituted by a function, by something to be done. But the function has to be known by one or present in one's consciousness, and, thus, this function is a semantic presence. Furthermore, the function can be fulfilled only by action under the guidance of knowledge. It is thus that a function is transformed into a responsibility. So a social position or role is constituted by a responsibility or set of responsibilities and the correlative rights and privileges, those things one must be free to do and have the means to do if one is to have the opportunity to fulfill the responsibilities of the position.

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² *Editor's Note:* In a conversation with the editor about this article, Dr. Adams noted that a purely physical system is an abstraction. All elements of the Universe exist in some organic relationship with each other and participate in, or have inherently in them, properties we associate with organisms.

A social system, then, consists of a set of interlocking positions, or we might say offices, constituted by accepted and recognized responsibilities and their correlative rights and privileges. The most basic position or office is that of personhood, but a group of persons would not constitute a society, to say nothing of a community. Each person has other positions. The society is the whole network of positions functioning together to meet the needs of the people. To the extent the social structure embodies the culture which structures the consciousness of the people, the people feel at home in the society and embrace and support the social structures. But there can be a gap between the emerging culture of a people and the existing social structures. If the gap is not closed by either social reforms or a redirection of the culture, the people will become alienated and a revolutionary situation is likely to develop.

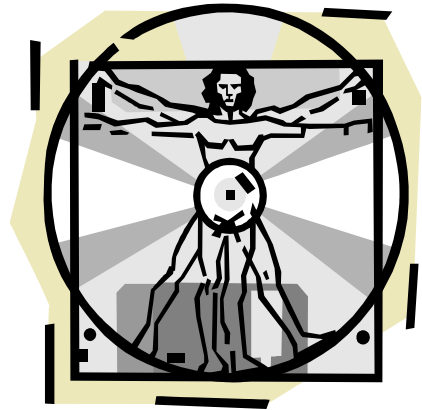
A community is a society in which the people share a common culture, live and work cooperatively within the social structure, and have a network of overlapping patches of intersubjective awareness and acceptance of one another's identities, interdependencies, and relationships.

As we have said, a person has to be culturally generated in and sustained by a historical community. One could no more be and survive as a person without a socio-cultural environment, than one could exist biologically without the biosphere. Yet, this dimension of our environment is also endangered by our modern orientation toward the world and the civilization it has generated.

Our concern with improving the material conditions of our existence has given rise to our technocratic, urban civilization. In America the majority of the people are concentrated in our great urban strips. With the refined division of labor for greater productivity, far too many workers, whether in an office or a factory, perform routinized tasks so minute in the overall operation that they cannot see nor appreciate the significance of their work. Each is one among so many, a cog in a machine, readily expendable or replaceable. Without expression of their personality in their work, they can have no identification with their jobs or sense of fulfillment in them. They work only for their paychecks, knowing that the institution for which they work is interested in only their productivity. Far too many live in an environment consisting largely of artifacts, with little sense of participation in the society, without community support or even a stable family. Many

executives and professionals who find some measure of self fulfillment in their work often find themselves rootless, without identification with place and neighborhood, without any real community, and with an unstable family situation. The social forces that work for ever-greater scientific and technological progress and economic prosperity tend to destroy the social environment that supports and nurtures the human spirit.

The impact on our culture of our dominant concern with getting what we want by manipulatory action has been perhaps the most devastating of all, especially for the human spirit. Science has been transformed from within this perspective to focus on the purely factual dimension of reality as semantically available to us through sensory perception and thought grounded in it. Value language and the language of meaning have been progressively eliminated from a descriptive/explanatory role in the empirical sciences, first in the physical sciences, then in the biological sciences, and lastly in the behavioral and social sciences. And as the reformed sciences have proven successful in our dominant enterprise of conquering and mastering our environment, we have come to take the empirical scientific method to be the only way of acquiring knowledge. This has reduced our humanistic view of the world, with its three categorial dimensions of fact, value, and meaning, to the naturalistic view with the one dimension of factuality. Value language and the language of meaning have to be either reduced to factual language or explained in a way that would be consistent with naturalistic metaphysics. Modern philosophers have made heroic efforts in this direction to accomplish this reductionistic effort. And naturalistic assumptions are pervasive in our culture and in the consciousness of the people, especially among the better educated.



This transformation of our conception of knowledge and categorial view of the world has undermined most of the intellectual and cultural supports of society and the human spirit. It has resulted in the loss of a transcendent dimension of knowledge, what Nietzsche has referred to as the death of God and is contributing to the collapse of the structure of authority, the reduction of social reality to groups of individuals with certain patterns of behavior,

and the abolition of human beings, at least as humanistically conceived. Under these conceptions, it seems appropriate, only there is no logical space left for it, to take a manipulatory approach to individual and group behavior and to develop a technology of behavior modification.

This modern view in its advanced stage, I submit is not an intellectual vision of humankind and the world that will support a great civilization and sustain the human spirit or the environment. In our preoccupation with that set of human needs which lend themselves to being satisfied by manipulatory action, we have over the past several hundred years developed a civilization that is not geared to and cannot satisfy that other set of human needs we distinguished in the beginning, those needs which can be satisfied only by understanding self and world in such a way that we can position ourselves in the world with both an affectionate embrace of it and submission to its requirements, with a sense of being at home in the world, having a purpose, and living and working in a cooperative relationship with our environment.

Solzhenitsyn, in his famous *Letter to the Soviet Leaders* in 1973, wrote: “All that endless progress [“dinned into our heads by the dreamers of the Enlightenment”] turned out to be an insane, ill-considered, furious dash into a blind alley.... [I]t is not ‘convergence’ that faces us and the Western World now, but total renewal and reconstruction in both East and West, for both are in the same impasse” (p. 21). “Bearing in mind,” he said, “the state of people’s morals, their spiritual condition and their relations with society, all the material achievements we trumpet so proudly are petty and worthless” (pp. 34-35).

“The urban life which, by now, as much as half our population is doomed to live,” he went on to say, “is utterly unnatural....and you are all old enough to remember our old towns—towns made for people, horses, dogs—and streetcars too; towns which were humane, friendly, cozy places, where the air was always clear, which were snow-clad in winter and in spring redolent with garden smells streaming through the fences in to the streets. There was a garden to almost every house and hardly a house more than two stories high—the pleasantest height for human habitation. The inhabitants of those towns were not nomads....An economy of non-gigantism with small-scale, though highly developed technology [which he proposes] will not only allow for but necessitate the building of *new* towns of the *old* type” (pp. 37-38).

We cannot, however, go back. Nor should we abandon our needs that lend themselves to being satisfied by manipulatory action. They are important, but it is a mistake to give them such priority that they distort our culture and social structures in such a way that our distinctively humanistic needs are starved. It would be equally wrong to allow our humanistic needs to dominate our culture and society so that we would be ravished by material poverty. What we need is the proper balance that will generate a civilization responsive to the full spectrum of human experience and its requirements.

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For the present, however, we must give priority to our humanistic needs in order to shift the balance and to redirect our civilization. There is a growing concern about the quality of life in our society, especially by those who have known the best that our civilization offers. Our art and literature express the deep anguish of a troubled spirit. The vibrant confidence of our civilization when it was young and the inner strivings that quicken the spirit are ebbing. Maybe we are approaching the end of modern civilization and the time is ripe for a major cultural revolution that will give rise to a new civilization, one in which the humanistic perspective will dominate.

Above all we need to reshape our patterns of thought and achieve an intellectual vision of humankind, and the world that will be responsible to the full range of human experience and generate a civilization that will support and nurture a fully human life for all. We need to break the technological myth and free our minds from its tyranny. Its power over our imagination is revealed by the fact that where people in earlier cultures saw gods and angels in the sky, we see flying saucers. While philosophy can and should play a powerful role in cultural therapy by critically examining the intellectual vision of humankind and the world generated by the modern culture, it is now spending most of its energy trying to clarify and to validate the modern cultural vision. In the Christian era of the West, philosophy was the handmaiden of theology; in the modern era it has been largely antitheological and the handmaiden of science. It played its most significant role in the intellectual litigations occasioned by the great cultural revolution that gave rise to modern civilization. Philosophy, especially in the English-speaking world, is now in its scholastic phase. With the central issues in the great

revolution considered settled and no longer of interest to most people, philosophy is cloistered in the universities working out the fine print of the settlement. Any major reorientation of the civilization will require a shift in our priorities and in our intellectual vision that will render our present civilization dysfunctional or destructive for the new orientation of life. Only then will philosophy be shaken out of its naturalistic scholasticism and begin to play a major cultural role again. Of course, a few philosophers here and there may make a contribution toward a shift in our orientation toward the world, but unless there are other forces working in that direction they will be voices crying in the wilderness. The scholastic philosophers for the most part will be latecomers to the revolution. They will have to be shaken by the shift, rather than their being the shakers.



In reorienting ourselves toward the world and breaking the power of the technological myth on our minds, we need a greater biological and communal awareness; or rather we need for the biological and the communal to make a greater impact on our awareness, for this would tilt us away from the approach of the conqueror and master toward affectionate embrace of and cooperation with our environment. This is why the culture of a predominantly rural, agricultural civilization is so different from that of an urban, technological society. The difference in the ways of relating to the environment makes for a profound difference in how we semantically appropriate reality and therefore in the way in which our world is present to us in our thought and lived experience.

In our time, we have seen many young people drop out of our culture, rejecting its dominant values and institutions. Many have sought to return to the land and communal life. In doing so, they are following the well-beaten paths of romantics rebelling against Enlightenment civilization throughout the modern period. This is not surprising for nothing restores the human spirit more than the natural environment of plant and animal life and genuine human community. Even a few plants in an apartment or an office can make a difference. And even an episode that brings people together in a real sharing of a situation so that they experience a momentary community of mind and spirit has an elevating effect on the spirit of all. The combination of community with others and with nature has always been the romantic's antidote for our inhuman urban, technological civilizations.

Although most romantics, in so far as they have tried to do something to further their vision of a better life, have been mere ineffective, they have been telling us something important. They have been pointing to the kind of environmental relationships that are needed to correct the one-sidedness and distortions of our modern civilization. We must somehow, as they have insisted, reorient ourselves toward the world and regain a humanistic perspective.

But how can this be done? Perhaps the culture-generating stance of a people can be reoriented only in the decline of their civilization after it has spent itself. This seems to be the way other great cultural revolutions have occurred. Consider the decline of Rome and the rise of the Christian era; and the decline of Christian civilization and the rise of modern Western Civilization. But what emerges as a civilization wanes is a product of the creative forces at work for new directions. We all have the opportunity for creative responses and for critical evaluation of the creative forces at work in our culture and can thereby contribute to the direction in which the culture develops.

Once our attitude toward the world is tilted in favor of our humanistic needs, the needed cultural revolution will follow.³ The human enterprise will be redefined and a new intellectual vision of humankind and the world will gradually emerge. Philosophers will rise to articulate it, to clarify it, to defend it against the declining naturalistic dogmas, and to validate it in terms of a reassessment of the semantic and knowledge-yielding powers of the human mind. The institutions and social structures will be transformed to embody the new culture and way of life. And perhaps in the new age, at least until its inner flaws pervert it and bring about its decline, human beings will enjoy a more harmonious and happier relationship with their natural and socio-cultural environment.

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Books by E. Maynard Adams, for further reading:

A Society Fit for Human Beings (SUNY Press, 1997)

The Metaphysics of Self and World: Toward a Humanistic Philosophy (Temple University Press, 1991)



³ *Editors Note:* Thomas Berry has called for the re-invention of the human in an integral relation with the larger community of life systems. Dr. E. Adams' work may be thought of as providing the basis for understanding what is needed to take humanity beyond its modern cultural vision to a new or re-invented humanity.