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DEATH, CHAOS, AND THE SOCIAL
CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING

by

HARRY GRIGGS HAMILTON

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the graduate faculty of The University of Alabama at Birmingham,
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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2002

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION
GRADUATE SCHOOL, UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA AT BIRMINGHAM

Degree __Ph.D.__ Program __Sociology__

Name of Candidate __Harry Griggs Hamilton__

Committee Chair __Kenneth L. Wilson__

Title __Death, Chaos, and the Social Construction of Meaning__

      The most basic reality driving human action may well be awareness of our own mortality, one implication of which is that human life ultimately has no meaning or significance. If this observation is correct, the fear of chaos and insignificance may underlie every attempt to understand the human condition. That is, from our earliest primitive myths, through religion and philosophy, even to the most current postmodern theory, we have struggled to come to terms with the knowledge that life is finite and death may make all truths and beliefs insignificant. Since the overwhelming majority of human evolutionary development occurred in small bands of hunters/gatherers, the strategies developed under such conditions provide the template for all subsequent strategies and are the standard against which all efforts may be understood. New strategies for comprehending life's meaning were introduced as new types of social organization appeared. The first of these was civilization, followed by modernity, and now postmodernity. Each of these eras is marked by the introduction of a new understanding of the meaning of existence, each of which is a variation on that original template established during our long years as members of small bands seeking defense against chaos in the company of the like-minded.

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Overview

Problem statement. It has been said that human beings thrive on uncertainty but abhor chaos, and nothing suggests the possibility of chaos more poignantly than death: death cancels all bets and negates all plans. As a creature aware of its inevitable demise, the human animal seeks assurance that death does not spell oblivion and life has purpose beyond mere existence. Consequently, the history of human social evolution may be viewed as an ongoing series of struggles to promote the triumph of meaning over meaninglessness and thus to symbolically transcend death. Humankind fears the chaos signaled by death and creates a meaningful order to stave off that chaos, but, if it is to sustain meaning, the conception of that order must be shared. That is, the human animal seeks to create meaning and defend against death in the company of like-minded people. The nature of this search to create meaning has changed as societies have evolved from simple and homogeneous to complex and heterogeneous and from primitive to postmodern. What follows is an analysis of this search and a possible theory regarding its evolution.

Death experiences—then and now. The late Murray Kempton (1997:6-10) once told a story of having been one of a group of young untested American soldiers sent to the South Pacific to clear some islands of the remaining Japanese holdouts at the end of World War II. While on patrol one day, he and his companions allowed themselves to be lured into an ambush by the more seasoned Japanese. Caught in the open, one behind the other

1

like proverbial ducks in a shooting gallery, they each scrambled for their lives and sought

cover behind some large boulders. Immediately behind Kempton was the rifleman carrying

a Browning Automatic. Kempton had just stepped up to make a dash for better cover

when the rifleman was hit. He continued:

> The last minute or so had been consumed with desperate efforts to seem invisible to everyone behind me; and I dedicated the next ten seconds to seeming deaf as well. I lay there fixed in denial that I had heard this voice in its distress. I was in that moment as quit of the war as if the copy of my discharge papers had lain for a century in Washington's files. My vow to go home with no grounds for apology had twice been violated; and I should surely had done it a third time if the BAR man had not cried out against that awful silence, "Oh, don't go away and leave me."
>
> No words other than those particular seven could have brought him my help or me some shoring up of my honor in its ruins. But these served for the miracle of taking me back to where seconds before I would not have gone for God or man; and, when I went to see what might be done for him, I covered the distance erect and uncaring what the enemy might see in the numbed conviction that my life was now forfeit anyway. (Kempton 1997:6-10)

Kempton recounts that he survived this incident with a conviction that he "would

never again flinch or flee from anything and that, most especially, [he] would never go

away and leave anyone" (10). The feeling faded with the memory of the experience, but

for one moment he had faced his own annihilation with equanimity.

In an earlier time and place, the weather had turned warm and the flowers were in

bloom, but the pleasure of seeing new life spring forth was tempered by the task at hand.

Several members of the band had carefully arranged flowers in a bed on which they would

lay to rest one of their kinsmen. This scene took place some 60,000 years ago at Shanidar

Cave in the Zagros Mountains of what is present day Iraq, and, although we do not know

how this person died nor what was really on the minds of his companions, we do know

that this tribe of Neanderthals took care to lay one of their own to rest ritually. Soil tests

from the burial site revealed the remains of a variety of flowering plants, suggesting this

individual had been intentionally laid on a bed of flowers. They did not simply leave the body to decay unattended, but rather treated it with some apparent reverence. This early ritual burial indeed suggests an awareness of life and death as well as some sense of an inclusive life (Leakey & Lewin 1978:154; Lewin 1988:120-122; Murphy 1989:187; Leakey 1994:155). But it also suggests something else about these early hominids: they had both a capacity and need to identify with their deceased kin. In ritually and collectively securing their link to the dead, they were, in effect, defending themselves against the fear of chaos and meaninglessness. For if the life of their dead kinsmen meant nothing, life itself was without meaning and purpose.

What do these stories have in common and what do they suggest about human-kind's efforts to grapple with death? I hope to provide some answers to these questions in the following pages, but at this point suffice to say that Kempton's impulse to save his companion's life at the risk of his own may well reflect an innate human capacity to identify with another even in the most threatening of circumstances. Some atavistic impulse in Kempton identified the rifleman as a fallen kinsman whom he could not leave alone to die, regardless of his own welfare. In saving his comrade he surrendered his own individual "self" and in the process experienced a sense of invulnerability.

The relationship between this act of selflessness and his accompanying sense of well-being cannot be mere happenstance but rather is the product of thousands, if not millions, of years of human development. During most of human history such altruism served the interest of the band or tribe and still today may inoculate the actor against the dread of meaninglessness and insignificance. What Kempton experienced as an individual may indeed have been a throwback to our earliest development—a trait planted in our

psyches since even before the appearance of the hominids at Shanidar Cave. Their ritual burying of the dead likewise infers a capacity to closely identify with others, even in death, and may represent the beginnings of a culture created in part to protect its members against the fear that life might be utterly meaningless.

Thesis explication. Over time the genetic characteristics of a species reach a state of *optimum adaptation* in which there exists just the right balance of contrasting traits. In such a state the species is optimally adapted to its current ecological niche (Sagan & Druyan 1992:247). The argument put forward here is that this kind of optimum adaptation is relevant to humankind's efforts to confront mortality. In its response to death awareness, humankind achieved *optimal adaptation* of culture and social organization during the long period of primitive prehistory, while, since the overtaking of primitive culture, he has experienced continuous and accelerated social change making such adaptation increasingly problematic. The prototype for the defense against death was formed over a period lasting some 100,000 years or more prior to the appearance of civilization, and the effectiveness of subsequent defensive strategies may be measured against this original prototype. We will return to this argument later, but for now suffice to say that, prior to the rise of civilization, hominids had tens of thousands of years to achieve an effective social construction of meaning within the context of relatively unchanging and uniform social conditions, making such constructions universal (in that they encompassed all of the known universe), in harmony with lived experience (since such experiences were unchanged for a thousand generations or more), and shared by all members of the culture.

Evolution of the social construction of meaning. We humans have, since the advent of self-awareness, struggled to adapt to the disconcerting knowledge of inevitable death. Indeed, Spengler (1928:16) argued that this knowledge is what separates us from other animals. From the beginnings of hominid evolution, this adaptation occurred in small, kin-based, homogeneous tribes living in conditions that remained relatively unchanged generation after generation. Roughly 10,000 to 12,000 years ago in the Near East our social worlds started to change in profound ways as we began to domesticate plants and animals and settle into larger more stable communities, eventually creating the earliest human civilizations. Around 400 to 500 years ago another major change took place with the rise of science, significant advances in technology, and cultural innovations, all of which made up the period later termed modern. Still, today we find ourselves in a world in which earlier certainties no longer seem to hold. The promises of previous eras, most especially those of modernity, have been in part unfulfilled, leaving some to reason that we are at the threshold of a new era in human history—the postmodern. Each of these stages in social evolution, from prehistory to postmodernity, has demanded new ways of adapting to the human awareness of death; each has demanded the creation of a meaningful order, or story, that attempts to explain the totality of human experience.

> So, whether you get your literature from deconstructionist critics and university-press novelists, or from the latest item in the airport bookstore, or from the daily news, you are likely to get a similar subtext about the human condition: a message that life is a matter of telling ourselves stories about life, and of savoring stories about life told by others, and of living our lives according to such stories, and of creating ever-new and more complex stories about stories—and that this story making is not just about human life, but is human life. (Anderson 1990:102)

The evolution of these stories from the earliest evidence of self-awareness to the present is the subject of this dissertation. It is a story about stories. Today's creator of

meaning experiences a world very different from that of his or her primitive ancestors, and the challenges of generating a satisfying explanation of life's meaning are much increased. Early humans constructed and modified their cosmologies over thousands of generations in small, kin-based bands with relatively little capacity to alter their physical world. Without such a capacity, they were for countless generations forced to reconcile themselves to their unchanging social and natural surroundings. In contrast, while largely oblivious to natural surroundings, humans are confronted today by a constantly changing social environment. The systems of meaning we erect must be able to absorb and accommodate countless social, cultural, and personal perceptions as well as incessant and accelerating change, a likely consequence of which is a weakening of their relevance and, hence, their effectiveness in addressing the fear of death and chaos. "In other words, there has arisen a problem of 'meaningfulness' not only for such institutions as the state or the economy but for the ordinary routines of everyday life" (Berger 1967:124-125). Today's explanations of life's meaning are challenged the instant they are formulated and cannot resonate like those of our primitive ancestors. For primitive humankind, the socially constructed meaningful order was taken for granted and appeared to be coextensive with the cosmos (25). Today, however, no such continuity exists, and this lack of consonance between life and stories about life has been the bane of human existence since the rise of the earliest civilizations. As Berger (1967:127) noted,

> Subjectively, the man in the street tends to be uncertain about religious matters. Objectively, the man in the street is confronted with a wide variety of religious and other reality-defining agencies that compete for his allegiance or at least attention, and none of which is in a position to coerce him into allegiance.... This relationship invites sociological analysis.

The focus of the following analysis is on the manner in which the human fear of death and chaos has manifested itself in the social construction of meaning within the four evolutionary periods identified above: primitive society, civilization, modernity, and postmodernity. For if humankind is truly driven by an innate desire to create order and symbolically transcend death, this drive must be at the heart of all attempts to give meaning to the human condition. "Every nomos [meaningful order] is an edifice erected in the face of the potent and alien forces of chaos. This chaos must be kept at bay at all cost" (Berger 1967:23-24). If the simple hunter/gatherer is predisposed to creating a satisfying explanation of life and death, is not the contemporary scientist or theorist (including this writer) driven by the same desire? In the following pages we will trace the evolution of that drive and its manifestations.

Theory

Social evolution/development. The theoretical foundation of this dissertation, in addition to concepts borrowed from Ernest Becker and Peter Berger discussed below, is the elementary proposition that the evolution of human society from being simple, homogeneous, kin-based to complex, heterogeneous, and diverse has been accompanied by the social construction of new worldviews in the four stages identified above. Such a proposition might suggest a functionalist perspective, but on closer examination functionality becomes only part of the process. During the long years of tribal existence it would seem that the worldview functioned as a source of cohesion and stability, as Durkheim ([1912] 1947) proposed. Since these societies remained relatively unchanged in size and subsistence strategy for a vast period of time, any challenges to the worldview could have been

absorbed without significant threat to its functionality. However, with the appearance of civilization, the existing narratives regarding life's meaning would have faced threats as new human experiences emerged and differing traditions began to mingle. Faced with new conditions not adequately explained by the old worldviews, new narratives arose that were in conflict with the old. For example, Martin Luther referred to Copernicus as "a fool with a crazy point of view" and humanists as "atheists who would be taken care of hereafter" (Barzun 2000:19). The traditional narrative does not easily surrender to the new and remains in a state of tension that some may try to reconcile in an effort to bring about a new state of functionality. We can see evidence of this process in pagan beliefs that were absorbed by the Judeo-Christian narrative as well as efforts beginning in the late Middle Ages (and continuing to the present) to reconcile Judaism and Christianity with a scientific worldview. Today, the resistance of a mechanistic/scientific worldview to a more relativistic one is both testament to the functionality of this view and evidence that conflict arises when new experiences and social conditions challenge the plausibility of the old nomos.

Becker on the dread of insignificance. The motive underlying all attempts to impart meaning to human existence, whether in the form of ancient myth or postmodern theory, is the fear that life is of absolutely no consequence. That is, humankind's greatest fear is not simply physical death but rather death without meaning. As Becker (1975:3-4) argued, "What man really fears is not so much extinction, but extinction *with insignificance.*" It is not death itself that we fear, for many people have faced death with equanimity and many others have chosen death over life. However, a death without meaning implies a life without meaning, and it is this meaninglessness that the human animal dreads.

Consequently, much cultural development is given to addressing this fear. "We alone among creatures, wake to a world gone to pieces, and we alone try to put it back together again–in our maps and metaphors, in the way, essentially, that we talk about it" (Dobb 1995:38). Indeed, humankind develops culture, in part, as a vehicle for achieving a semblance of immortality. As a part of a larger cultural corpus that gives meaning and purpose to existence through its stories and beliefs, the self-aware human animal is better equipped to face physical death and need not have a paralyzing fear of utter annihilation. "We come to grips with the world by drawing pictures, telling stories, conversing" (40), the sum of which we call culture.

Since the rise of civilization and the development of social institutions, religion has been humankind's principle defense against death. As per Lemert (1999:253), "Whatever may be the social function of religion, we are not speaking with good sociological sense unless we are talking about the *shared* experience of finitude." Gerhard Staguhn (1992: 14) made a similar observation regarding religion:

> It is evident that in earlier times man was part of a world that seemed to him pro-
> foundly alien and frightening. By placing his familiar and comforting home in the
> middle, he was able to ward off the world's strangeness and to establish a whole
> and holy order. At the root of religion–to this day!–lies fear. More precisely, the
> fear of death, which is but a synonym for chaos. Religion is nothing but a heroic
> negation of chaos and death, man's attempt to oppose world-chaos by establishing
> a permanent center, and to define thereby a reference point for everything–in short,
> a meaning.

While religion may have taken on the primary task of defending against meaning-lessness, it is by no means the exclusive strategy employed in our defense against chaos. We are creators of meaning, and those creations may take any form, so long as they support the view of an ordered and (even if relativistic) predictable universe. As Barzun (2000:31) observed, "the idea of worshipping one God is akin to the scientific hope of

bringing all phenomena under one law." We must have some reasonable assurance that the sun will not rise in the west tomorrow morning and zigzag backward across the sky, and we must know that death does not negate life.

Our grand narratives provide this assurance, but it should be understood that, while this function of culture may include a belief in an individual afterlife, such a belief is not necessary. (Indeed, the entire issue of individual identity among our primitive ancestors is problematic.) Instead, critical to such belief systems is an assurance of the perpetuation of the cultural body.

> We can see that what people want in any epoch is a way of transcending their physical fate, they want to guarantee some kind of indefinite duration, and culture provides them with the necessary symbols or ideologies; societies can be seen as structures of immortality power. (Becker 1975:63)

Today, however, we find it increasingly difficult to define or locate a cultural body with which we can intimately identify, and there are few stories that satisfy the human needs for universality and consistency with lived experience. Consequently, postmodern humankind is faced with a conundrum: What narrative can possibly give meaning to the exceedingly varied and protean human experience of the twenty-first century? Much of what we identify as postmodern is likely driven by our desire to resolve this dilemma.

Another of Becker's ideas deserves mention, and that is the role of violence in the reinforcement of a group's worldview. He argued that in denying death the human animal is wont to project its fears onto something or someone else, for example, nature, other animals, or other humans.

> The thing that makes man the most devastating animal that ever stuck his neck up into the sky is that he wants a stature and a destiny that is impossible for an animal; he wants an earth that is not an earth but a heaven, and the price of this kind of fantastic ambition is to make the earth an even more fantastic graveyard than it naturally is. (Becker 1975:96)

Becker contended that this fear manifests itself in tribal cultures with isolated and

random acts of violence (for among other reasons, they simply lacked the resources for

prolonged warfare), but, with the advent of civilization, "ever larger numbers of people

were deliberately and methodically drawn into a 'dreadful ceremony' on behalf of the few"

(1975:99). As the leadership of large-scale societies amassed greater power, that power

was put to the service of overcoming humankind's basic fear of chaos and meaningless-

ness through collective human sacrifice in warfare against enemies of all kinds. Here

Becker (1975:99) drew on the works of Lewis Mumford who proposed that this demoni-

zation "is based on a continuation of the anxiety of primitive man in the face of his over-

whelming world; the megamachine tries to generate enough power to overcome basic

human helplessness." Lifton (1979:304) made this same observation, speaking specifically

of one of humankind's earliest civilizations, the Egyptians. He referred to the ancient

Pyramid Texts:

> The immortalization of even a king depended upon the concept of an enemy de-
> prived of that status. Indeed, these forty-five hundred-year-old Texts suggests
> what may be the most fundamental of all definitions of *an enemy: a person who
> must die, so that one may oneself transcend death*.

Berger's sacred canopy. Becker (1975) maintained that all of humankind's life-

giving social constructions, whether primitive ritual or modern technology, are an effort to

achieve some control over life and death: to attain "immortality power." These social

constructions often take the form of a story or grand narrative created by a culture to

anchor itself in the cosmos and impose order on what might otherwise be a chaotic and

disorderly universe. Anthropology, in speaking of small-scale societies, might speak of

such "a theory of how the different parts fit together in a unified totality" as a

"cosmology" (Weiner 1994:21). Peter Berger (1967:19) refered to this socially constructed ordering of reality as a *nomos* and maintained that such ordering is both *the* business of society and intrinsic to the biological make-up of Homo sapiens.

> In other words, both with regard to language and to the socially objectivated world as a whole, it may be said that the individual keeps "talking back" to the world that formed him and thereby continues to maintain the latter as reality.
>   It may now be understandable if the proposition is made that the socially constructed world is, above all, an ordering of experience. A meaningful order, or nomos, is imposed upon the discrete experiences and meanings of individuals. To say that society is a world-building enterprise is to say that it is ordering, or nomizing, activity. The presupposition for this is given...in the biological constitution of *Homo sapiens*....The ordering of experience is endemic to any kind of social interaction. Every social action implies that individual meaning is directed toward others and ongoing social interaction implies that the several meanings of the actors are integrated into an order of common meaning. (19)

All human attempts to impose order on reality are a part of this nomizing activity.

Myths, religions, philosophies, ideologies, scientific theories, etcetera have all been employed, often simultaneously, to address the question of the ultimate fate of the individual, the band, the tribe, or humankind. "History, then, can be understood as the succession of ideologies that console for death...*all* cultural forms are *in essence sacred* because they seek the perpetuation and redemption of the individual life" (Becker 1975:64). Or as Spengler (1926:166) noted,

> "From the child of five to myself is but a step. But from the new-born baby to the child of five is an appalling distance," said Tolstoi once. Here, in the decisive moments of existence, when man first becomes man and realizes his immense loneliness in the universe, the world-fear reveals itself for the first time as the essentially human fear in the presence of death, the limit of the light-world, rigid space. Here, too, the higher thought originates as meditation upon death. Every religion, every scientific investigation, every philosophy proceeds from it.

Closely linked to the concept of the nomos is what Berger (1967) refered to as a *theodicy*, an explanation intended to reconcile real life experiences with the prevailing nomos. The link between experience and narrative, particularly as societies became more

varied and complex, has not always been apparent, so some mechanism is sometimes

needed to harmonize the two. Berger (1967:80) explained:

> Our purpose has been accomplished if we have indicated the centrality of the
> problem of theodicy for any religious effort at world-maintenance, and indeed also
> for any effort at the latter on the basis of a non-religious *Weltanschauung*. The
> worlds that man constructs are forever threatened by the forces of chaos, finally by
> the inevitable fact of death. Unless anomy, chaos and death can be integrated
> within the nomos of human life, this nomos will be incapable of prevailing through
> the exigencies of both collective history and individual biography. To repeat, every
> human order is a community in the face of death. Theodicy represents the attempt
> to make a pact with death. Whatever the fate of any historical religion, or that of
> religion as such, we can be certain that the necessity of this attempt will persist as
> long as men die and have to make sense of the fact.

A theodicy then may be understood as a refinement of the nomos, as a mechanism

that allows continual adjustment between ever-changing social conditions, or life experi-

ence, and the nomos. Reality and the meaning societies attach to that reality exist in a

perpetual state of real and/or potential tension, and a theodicy can serve as a tool for

reconciling that tension. For example, the Christian concept of salvation is especially

portable and can be employed in a wide range of social and cultural circumstances to

provide comfort and assurance to anyone identifying himself or herself as a Christian.

Likewise, the scientific trust in the power of objectivity can anchor one against the endless

vicissitudes of scientific argument. A theodicy is critical to the maintenance of a nomos

and assumes a vital role when conditions are in a state of rapid change.

Social Evolution and Changing Nomoi

"The evolution of societies from small-scale intimate groups to large and complex

urban states is a fact of human history" (Earle 1994:940). Although how and why this

evolution occurred are subjects of much debate and controversy, we need only establish

here that such social evolution has taken place and that at least four successive stages may be identified. Briefly, these stages are *primitive* or *precivilization*, characterized by small bands of less than one hundred related individuals[1] ; *civilization*, made possible by agriculture and characterized by increased populations, the growing dominance of towns and cities, and hierarchical authority; *modernity*, which accompanied the rise of industry, urbanization, the further multiplication of roles and statuses, and even larger populations; and *postmodernity*, marked by globalization, rapidly expanding population, a questioning of the accomplishments of modernity, and a rejection of absolutes. It is not necessary to establish the complex *causes* of this evolution in order to examine its *consequences* regarding human efforts to create order and meaning, since the purpose here is only to posit a link between societal type and the construction of meaning.

As Sorokin (1941:17) noted, the important parts of an integrated culture are causally interdependent; therefore, any effort to identify simple linear relationships between the appearance of new nomoi and specific social phenomena would be problematic at best. The initial growth in population size, complexity, and diversity following domestication of the food supply may be the closest we can come to a linear relationship, for, once these changes took place, old nomoi interacted with new as new nomoi both influenced and were influenced by accelerating social change across every facet of society. Suffice to say that each of these four stages in social evolution is marked by the introduction of an expanded nomos that seeks to incorporate the new social reality, and this new socially constructed order then exists in a state of sometimes uneasy tension alongside the old.

---

[1] Diamond (1997) identified two intermediate stages between the band and the rise of the state, tribes, and chiefdoms. Tribes and chiefdoms represent transitional types, which culminated in the rise of civilization.

Social change that began with the domestication of food sources accelerated with each successive shift in social organization. Nomadic scavengers and hunters were replaced by sedentary farmers who eventually coalesced into complex civilization with large urban centers. Farming was later pushed to the margins by industry, resulting in even larger, more urbanized, and more socially complex and diverse societies. Each increase in population and shift in social organization stretched the distance between community and society and strained the plausibility of the nomos. The task of socially constructing a meaningful order capable of resonating equally with all members of increasingly diverse society demanded greater inclusion, but the more inclusive the story/nomos the less specific it could be to any particular community or individual experience and, hence, the less plausible for all concerned. This distancing became apparent to early observers of modernity, such as Durkheim, who focused on such epiphenomena as anomie, a phenomenon that has only become more pronounced under conditions of postmodernity. As author John Berger (2000:52) observed, "we do not live in the first chapter of Genesis...[rather] we live in a world whose events do not confirm our Being." In such a world, the human animal struggles for immortality power without having at his disposal unambiguous instructions for achieving solace in the face of oblivion.

Accumulation of nomoi. As illustrated in Table 1 below, a nomos and its theodicy do not necessarily disappear simply because some new social construction of meaning has appeared. As social conditions change, new stories appear to capture the new experience, while earlier nomoi assume marginal status or jockey to maintain prominence by trying to adapt to new conditions. Tribal animism and supernaturalism have survived through all

stages in one form or another and are even experiencing a revival in such movements as the new tribalism. Indeed, as the prototype for all subsequent nomoi, this tribal worldview has incredible staying power and may be found at the core of many socio-political conflicts from the rise of civilization into the twenty-first century. In ancient Greece, religion survived the advent of philosophy (Lemert 1999:251), and of course religion and philosophy have even thrived in various permutations, while currently science, far from retreating to the wings, struggles to reconcile its worldview with the experiences of postmodernity. Indeed, "It could well be said that the most unyielding of social scientific puzzles over the last century has been just why religion, which was so firmly the foundation of premodern social order, has lost so *little* of its effective force in post-traditional societies" (241). Effective nomoi do not readily yield to new conditions. If a worldview and its concomitant beliefs and practices effectively provide some solace to the fearful, they are not easily discarded. The following table illustrates the accumulation of nomoi accompanying population growth and the four stages of social evolution.

Table 1. Societal Evolution and Defense Against Death

SOCIETAL TYPE	Primitive	Civilization	Modern	Postmodern
	tribal	large	large	large
	small	complex	complex	complex
	kinship-based	religiously based	urban	urban
	homogeneous	heterogeneous	industrail	postindustrial
	unchanging	changing	economically based	economically based
	communal	nascent individualism	heterogeneous	heterogeneous
	socially intense	separate from nature	rapidly changing	rapidly changing
	integrated with nature		individualistic	individualistic
			separate from nature	separate from nature
			nationalistic	global
NOMOI	an animate universe	an animate universe	an animate universe	an animate universe
		a principled universe	a principled universe	a principled universe
			a mechanical universe	a mechanical universe
				a relativistic universe
THEODICY	ritual and magic	ritual and magic	ritual and magic	ritual and magic
		faith and reason	faith and reason	faith and reason
			reason and empriricism	reason and empricism
				irony

The primitive prototype. The time elapsed since the rise of civilization has been but the blink of an eye when measured against all of human experience, meaning that the earliest and most prolonged conditions in which humankind evolved an adaptation to death awareness were those of primitive hunters/gatherers. For millions of years, until the rise of civilization around 12,000 years ago, our ancestors lived socially in kin-based bands of foragers and hunters, and it was in such conditions that a type of nomos evolved that is the prototype for all human efforts to give meaning to life. All subsequent attempts to socially construct a meaningful order may best be understood in relation to these first prolonged experiences. As per Diamond (1999:270), "The band is the political, economic, and social organization that we inherited from our millions of years of evolutionary history. Our developments beyond it all took place within the last few ten thousands of years." Or, as Sagan and Druyan (1992:254-256) observed, the human animal is genetically predisposed to life in small groups to whom he or she is passionately loyal, allowing only occasional sexual mingling with others. Therefore, the rise of civilization with its large, complex social organization marks a sea change in human social evolution, and from that point forward we have struggled to create plausible meaning in a rapidly changing and unfamiliar world. The changes first introduced with civilization have grown exponentially, and humankind has been left racing to create new stories in an endless effort to keep pace.

SOCIETAL TYPES AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING

Introduction

What follows is an examination of the four stages of social evolution previously articulated–primitive, civilized, modern, postmodern–along with their prevailing nomoi. In what amounts to an analysis of the full breadth of human social history and thought regarding the meaning of existence, it would be impossible to treat thoroughly either the history itself or the many ideas generated within each historical period. Therefore, the intent here is to identify critical societal characteristics associated with each period and to illustrate major shifts in thinking accompanying these periods. In no way is this dissertation intended to be a complete review of the works of any of the many writers mentioned herein but rather to show trends and demonstrate changes from a previous era. People have dedicated careers to the understanding of ideas mentioned here with no more than a passing comment, but when addressing all of human history it is necessary to paint in very broad strokes.

In addition, while I believe the proposed theory to be applicable to both the Eastern and Western experience, the focus of the analysis is on the latter. Of course, the real world cannot be so neatly halved, but the ideas that anchor the contemporary end of the time continuum (i.e., modernity and postmodernity) are largely of Western origin. Therefore, if one perspective must be chosen in the interest of brevity, it seems reasonable to assume that of the Western tradition.

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Primitive Society

Hominid history. Stories of the earliest hunters/gatherers of course do not exist in the historical record. Nevertheless, some inferences may be gleaned from material remains of prehistoric societies (such as artifacts and painting), and, in any case, the importance of trying to understand the earliest societies is well established. Primitive societies are an important point of reference because they provide a window into human nature before it was transformed by civilization and show us "the kind of life we are biologically evolved to lead" (Schmookler 1984:8). La Barre (1954:268) argued that, particularly in the area of belief systems, the most ancient of societies can be the most useful to study:

> For reasons we have discussed previously, one of the characteristics of man in society, uniquely among animals, is his practiced ability to know things that are not so. As individuals, only humans (and their laboratory animals) can be psychotic or neurotic. And in societies, only *Homo sapiens* can be superstitious. Furthermore, since culture is a system of postulates, it is also cumulative and erects new symbolic structures on the old agreements of now taken-for-granted unconscious or covert culture. For these reasons, of all of man's superstitions, the most useful to study—both theoretically and practically, didactically and therapeutically—would be those that are most "archaic" culturally, the most ancient and widespread.

Information drawn from surviving hunting and gathering societies is also of some value in determining something of the experiences of the earliest humans (Redfield 1953:2-3; Parrinder 1971:35). However, these data should always be interpreted with the understanding that extant hunting and gathering society cannot be taken as a perfect replica of our earliest forms of human organization. Indeed, as per Foley (1995:220), "hunter-gathering in the form known to us today is a parallel development to agriculture, not an archaic, ancestral way of life." Nevertheless, the essential elements of kinship, small size, and stasis should render these known societies useful examples for this analysis.

If the molecular evidence is correct, the human lineage began some seven million years ago with the appearance of ape-like creatures capable of upright bipedal locomotion. Between 7 million and 2 million years ago these bipeds spread over a relatively large geographic area with each adapting to slightly different ecological conditions. (Leakey 1994:xv). At around 2.5 million years ago an expansion in brain size and tool use marked the appearance of the genus *Homo* (Diamond 1992:36; Leakey 1994:11-12). These hominids were meat eaters, and some believe they were hunters, although the evidence is unclear on this point, and they may have only scavenged the meat in their diets (Leakey 1994:59). Nevertheless, experiments suggest that these earliest tool makers were predominantly right handed, a dominance not found among apes, suggesting that by 2 million years ago we were already becoming uniquely human (41). There is considerable evidence that language arose at this time (130), making possible the further development of self-awareness and culture. *Homo erectus* evolved around 1.8 million to 2 million years ago as perhaps the first species to include hunting as a significant part of its subsistence strategy (xiv), although others would argue that hunting did not become common until the evolution of modern humans around 100,000 years ago (Diamond 1992:39; Leakey 1994:59). Nevertheless, by 1.7 million years ago *Homo erectus* was engaged in intense parental care of infants, and this care took place in a highly social context, which is a hallmark of the human species (Leakey 1994:48, 53). Using tool manufacture as a measure of evolutionary development, tools moved from being rather crude productions around 2.5 million years ago, became more complex with the appearance of *Homo erectus* at 1.8 million years ago, became even more complex and refined with the evolution of archaic *Homo*

sapiens sometime after 500,000 years ago (Diamond 1992:37), and finally improved markedly in quality and workmanship with the arrival of fully modern humans by 35,000 years ago (Leakey 1994:93). The individuals who produced these tools as well as carvings and cave paintings were like us in every way but their culture.

It is impossible to say with any precision just when our ancestors first developed self-awareness and began the quest to understand the meaning of life. The evidence for such a shift can only be inferred from physical remains, and such remains tell us little about thoughts or perceptions. We only know that as early as 100,000 years ago hominids began to give care and attention to the bodies of the departed (Leakey 1994:155), suggesting a belief in some kind of inclusive life force and a capacity to identify with the experiences of others of their species. Numerous presumed burial sites spanning the Paleolithic have been uncovered, and, while there is some variation from site to site, there also exist a number of significant similarities. The remains always appear to have been intentionally arranged and are often decorated with shells, ornaments, or various pigments. In many cases the skulls have been arranged separately and exhibit evidence suggesting the brains were removed and possibly eaten for some magico-religious reason. And, based on the appearance of hand axes, scrapers, and the split bones of such animals as wild ox at several sites, it would appear that feasts sometimes accompanied burials. Without some sense of a life force existing apart from the body, there would have been no discernible reason to engage in this ritual treatment of the deceased found throughout hominid prehistory.

One of the oldest hominid burial sites was discovered in the 1920s at Chou Kou Tien, China (James 1957:18; Milner 1990:358-359). There archaeologists found the

remains of a number of skulls with no sign of injury but with similar enlargements of the foramen magnum. Some anthropologists have speculated that these skulls belonged to people who had been killed and had their brains removed for ritual consumption possibly to extract some sort of "soul-substance" (James 1957:18). While this theory is controversial, if true it would mean that *Homo erectus*, perhaps 400,000 to 500,000 years ago, was already conscious of mortality.

In 1939 a 70,000 to 100,000 year old Neanderthal skull was discovered on the Tyrrhenian coast within a circle of stones in a small chamber of a grotto. Bones of several animals—deer, ox, hyena, horse, elephant, and—lion were scattered around the floor. The skull appeared to have a fatal blow to the temple, and the foramen magnum had been cut away, possibly to extract the brain for ritual consumption (James 1957:19).

The best evidence of ritual cannibalism comes from a site in Bavaria dating to perhaps 100,000 years ago. Twenty-seven skulls were found grouped in a bed of red ochre, all facing westward, and it would appear that the heads were severed with a flint knife after death, decorated with shells and deer teeth necklaces, and ceremonially preserved (James 1957:20). The practice of decorating with red ochre and cowrie shells (symbolic of blood and the vagina) was common and thought by some to represent the idea of rebirth (Eisler 1995:2).

In the lowest level of a series of caves at Grimaldi in Italy were found an old woman and a youth in 1901 who differed significantly from the Cro-Magnon types found in the higher caves. A boy of about 16 years lay on his right side with legs doubled under his thighs. The woman was laid to the left of the boy with her knees tightly flexed shoulder

high. Four rows of pierced shells surrounded the boy's head, and his skeleton was stained red with iron peroxide. The woman wore shell bracelets. The heads were supported by flat stones, and the space between was filled with iron of peroxide. In the stratum above the woman and boy was a man of Cro-Magnon type who apparently had been carefully positioned with his forearms drawn up and decorated with shells about his head and chest. His head rested on a block of sandstone reddened with ochre. On the hearth on which it was laid were rough limestone and quartzite tools. Above this were two young children clad in a shroud of shells, above which were the mutilated remains of a woman who had evidently been reburied and surrounded with trochus shells. In the adjoining Grotte du Cavillon rested a Cro-Magnon man covered with shells and haematite, giving him a scarlet color. "On the cranium was a fillet of seashells, and twenty-two perforated canine teeth of deer were near the frontal bones. A bone point made from the radius of a deer lay across the forehead, and two flint flakes against the occiput" (James 1957:24).

It would appear that by the Middle Paleolithic a cult of the dead had been established and that there was some expectation of life extending beyond death, or at least some kind of continued existence after the decay of the body (James 1957:22-23). In the Upper Paleolithic (about 40,000 years ago) the body was often placed in a grave with ornaments and shells (such as cowrie and others) with the bone covered in red ochre after removal of the flesh. Again, the red represented the color of life's blood and given its frequent use was probably intended to perpetuate the use of the body by the deceased. They seemed to be preparing the dead for a life beyond that would require the same tools for survival needed in this life. And, as previously suggested, the frequent retention of skulls and brain

extraction may have been an effort to gain some power from the dead by imbibing their virtue and strength (28-30).

Campbell (1969:66-67) drew similar conclusions from the evidence of Neanderthal burial sites:

> The idea of the earth as mother and of burial as a re-entry into the womb for rebirth appears to have recommended itself to at least some of the communities of mankind at an extremely early date. The earliest unmistakable evidences of ritual and therewith of mythological thought yet found have been the grave burials of Homo neanderthalis, a remote predecessor of our own species, whose period is perhaps to be dated as early as 200,000 to 75,000 B.C.E. Neanderthal skeletons have been interred with supplies (suggesting the idea of another life), accompanied by animal sacrifice (wild ox, bison, and wild goat), with attention to an east-west axis (the path of the sun, which is reborn from the same earth in which the dead are placed), in flexed position (as though within the womb), or in a sleeping posture—in one case with a pillow of chips of flint. Sleep and death, awakening and resurrection, the grave as a return to the mother for rebirth; but whether Homo neanderthalis thought the next awakening would be here again or in some world to come (or even both together) we do not know.

Characteristics of primitive society. One of the most significant features of primitive society relative to the social construction of meaning is the immeasurably slow pace of change experienced. As previously noted, choosing the earliest known fossil remains as the beginning of human experience, our ancestors enjoyed relatively stable physical and structural conditions for millions of years. Of course physical conditions did change over this span of time but at such a slow pace as to be imperceptible to any single generation or even any cluster of generations. For all practical purposes, our first ancestors evolved under conditions of relative uniformity: uniformity across space, time, and social experience. Combine the physical attributes—small size, homogeneity, social intensity, communalism, intimacy with nature—with the fact that our earliest ancestors must

have enjoyed constancy and uniformity of experience both within and between genera-

tions, and we can begin to understand the persistence of certain themes in the never ending

efforts to extract order and meaning from human experience. Such conditions formed in

the human animal a predisposition for congruity between lived experience and the mean-

ings attached to that experience, and that predisposition did not vanish with the demise of

primitive society.

The earliest human societies have been typically defined by their subsistence

strategy—a strategy that involved taking from the immediate environment whatever was

readily available, either by hunting, scavenging, gathering, fishing, or some combination of

these activities. It should be noted that there is considerable debate among anthropologists

about the depiction of early hominids as nimble and crafty hunters of large mammals, since

recent evidence suggests scavenging was a more likely activity (Foley 1995:208; Tattersall

1998:131). However, this question is not critical to the argument at hand. For whether

they primarily hunted or scavenged, they were not able to produce a food surplus, and this

fact affected every aspect of their social organization.

Whether hunting took root 2 million or 100,000 years ago, hunter/gatherer socie-

ties tended to share some general physical characteristics that changed very little in the

long transition from *Homo erectus* to *Homo sapiens*. Hunters and gatherers tend to live in

nomadic bands of around 25 individuals—a core of men, women, and their children—who

are linked culturally and linguistically to a larger tribe of as many as 500 individuals

(Leakey 1994:60). As Redfield (1953:7) noted, humankind's primary condition is that of a

small isolated community in which every adult knows everyone else. Of course individual

communities came and went, but these salient features of small size and homogeneity did not change between the appearance of the first hominid communities 2 million years ago and the introduction of plant and animal domestication some 10,000 to 12,000 years ago.

By the Middle Pleistocene some 500,000 years ago, our ancestors were already thoroughly social creatures who employed teamwork in hunting (Clark 1977:27-28). Indeed, sociality was likely an essential attribute of even earlier ancestors. "Primates are quintessentially social creatures" (Leakey 1994:46), and humans may be the most social of the primates. Nicholas Humphrey, a psychologist at the University of Cambridge, argued that in fact primate intelligence evolved to meet the demands of daily life in the intensely social circumstances experienced by primates and that "the primary role of the creative intellect...is 'to keep society together'" (147). Thus, the evolution of the genus *Homo* and the development of hunting and gathering social organization gave a selective advantage to those with the most acute social skills (154). For the human animal, empathy may be just as important as raw power. Both individual and collective survival depend on the ability to know what others are thinking.

In humans, mind reading goes beyond simply predicting what others will do under certain circumstances: it includes knowing how others might feel. The human animal has the capacity to empathize with others when they face situations they know to be painful or distressing. Vicariously, we experience the anguish of others, sometimes so intensely as to suffer physical pain. One of the more poignant, if not the most poignant, vicarious experiences in human society is the fear of death, or simply death awareness, which has played a large role in the construction of mythology and religion (Leakey 1994:153). It seems that

we owe our very intelligence to the demands for social cohesion, and our first stories, the fruits of our first intellectual creations, may well have been intended to bind us together in defense against isolation in life and death.

Relative to later societal types, the structure of primitive society is quite simple. Within primitive social organization there are few statuses, roles, groups, and institutions; minimal social hierarchy; little division of labor; and few if any external social controls. As will be discussed later, this simple social structure lends itself to the construction of a nomos that stresses the collective or communal nature of humankind and the uniformity of the human experience, again resulting in a predisposition to share our worldview with others.

A collective orientation is a hallmark of primitive culture, where all relationships are primary and members are socially well integrated and communally rather than individually oriented (Campbell 1969:82; Turnbull 1983:274). Consequently, to the degree that it even exists, individual identity is inextricably linked to that of the kinship-based society. "There is no way in which the small group of relatives could be seen as somehow having different interests from those of the individual composing it...there could be no distinction between the society and the individual" (Fox 2001:22). Indeed, "tribalism establishes an individual's identity and significance as a person only in the context of his or her family and community...[and] an isolated individual lacking the concrete presence and intangible ties of kinship is understood as hopelessly lost or effectively dead" (Solomon & Higgins 1997:46). Whatever the actual nature of individual identity in primitive society, where the individual is defined by his or her group or tribal affiliation, we would expect

the nomoi to reflect this social reality. These earliest defensive strategies to ward off chaos and meaninglessness link the individual to the larger corporate body, which is, in turn, embedded in the cosmic order. The concept of individual salvation seems to have been introduced only after the weakening of traditional tribal affiliations.

Early humankind's physical (and mental) relation to nature is very different from that of later societal types in that one is fully embedded in nature and is, therefore, not locked in a struggle to control natural forces from some other plane of existence. Primitive cultures are extremely sensitive to their physical environment, and their dependence on plant and animal exploitation requires a high degree of interdependence and cooperation (Leakey 1994:61). As Redfield observed, early mankind's relation to his environment was that of "an intimate participation rather than a manipulative transformation" (Wallace 1966:9). The life of the individual was embedded in the community, as the life of the community was embedded in nature (Berger 1967:61). The life of the primitive was marked by submission to and immersion in nature, and their understanding of life's meaning reflects this reality. Images of their own origin and destiny, ideas about morality, concepts of universality, the value of harmony, conception of sacred forces, and their creation of the concept of soul are all inextricably linked to their place as creatures of the natural world. Nevertheless, there is no reason to assume that primitive humankind would be any less concerned than his modern descendants with controlling nature, and, as Becker (1975:23) noted, he or she employed an array of ritual techniques to do just that. Standing very much inside the natural world, primitive humans imagined themselves capable of controlling natural forces and life itself through ritual (6-7). However, unlike modern

humankind, the primitive did not and does not assume it is his or her place to have dominion over nature (Solomon & Higgins 1997:47), and one's capacity to actually alter natural conditions and influence events was largely symbolic.

Likewise, early humankind, through the medium of culture, developed symbolic control over death. As per Robert Jay Lifton (1979:7),

> For becoming human meant surrendering both ignorance of death (the state of other animals) and the expectation of living forever (a prerogative only of God). "Knowledge," in our sense, is the capacity of the symbolizing imagination to explore the idea of death and relate it to a principle of life-continuity–that is, the capacity for culture. The parable thus depicts an *exchange of literal for symbolic immortality*. It suggests an ideal of a mortal being who need not remain numbed toward (ignorant of) the fact of death and yet transcend it.

The primitive nomos: An animate universe. The primitive nomos was one in which the universe was teeming with life forces so that the lines between animate and inanimate, human and animal, and even life and death were blurred. In that these life forces could exist in all things, take any form, and change constantly, virtually everything could be explained by their activity. Birth, death, disease, accident, good fortune, and misfortune could all be explained for all time and everywhere by the existence of these supernatural forces, and given the static nature of primitive society for countless generations there was no reason to question this basic understanding of the workings of the universe and the meaning of life.

The cumulative effect of the qualities of primitive society is a tightly constructed and uniform social reality and a nomos that is continually and consistently reinforced. "The primitive and precivilized communities are held together essentially by common understandings as to the ultimate nature and purpose of life" (Redfield 1953:12). "When an

entire society serves as the plausibility structure for a religiously legitimated world, all the important social processes within it serve to confirm and reconfirm the reality of this world" (Berger 1967:48). That is, in these earliest human societies, the nomos and the cosmos appear to be coextensive (25), so our prototype for the social construction of reality is one in which life experience and the meaning we attach to that experience are consistent, harmonious, and reciprocating.

As suggested previously, in its day-to-day existence primitive humankind was forced to adapt continuously to things beyond their control and maintain a keen sensitivity to the laws of nature, before plant and animal domestication altered the relationship between humankind and the environment forever. For millions of years humankind was forced into a humbling and passive relationship to the world, and the earliest and most prolonged experience with death took place in this context. However, within the past 10,000 years the human animal has stepped outside of nature and pursued a continuous struggle to control its forces. In doing so humans may have unwittingly undermined what was possibly their most effective defense against the dread of meaninglessness and chaos to date: that is, their natural and rightful place in the cosmic order. When humankind stepped outside of nature, it may have foreclosed on the automatic transposition to that plane of "inherently comforting cosmic meaning" at death (Berger 1967:62), and every effort to secure life's meaning since the rise of civilization seems to have struggled with this dilemma. A look at some primitive nomoi might help to illustrate this intimacy between primitive mankind and the natural world in both life and death.

Campbell (1969:118-119) recounted a folktale of the Basumbwa people of East Africa, whose subsistence consisted of a mix of hunting and farming. According to this story a young man is led by his dead father through a cleft in the earth to an underworld where he is left alone to observe the proceedings of its inhabitants for several days. On the morning of the first day the Great Chief Death appears, who on one side is perfumed and beautiful and on the other rotten and maggot infested. Attendants gather the maggots as they fall and wash his sores. On this first day he announces that any child born that day will face a life of ruin and misery. His garden will fail, he will be killed in the hunt, and robbed on the road. The second morning his attendants wash and perfume the beautiful side and he proclaims that anyone born this day will meet with wealth and happiness. His father then returns and tells his son if he had only arrived yesterday his wealth would have been ordained, but it was not to be, and the son was told to return home on the next day.

Of course interpretations of such stories are subject to debate, but one possible view of this particular story is that one generation has taken another back to the womb, to a place where past and present meet, for a lesson in the laws of nature, and that lesson seems to be that one's fate is not in one's own hands but is dictated by the larger order in which the community is embedded. In this particular story, like so many others, there is no hint of afterlife or gods to whom one may appeal for salvation but only the dictates of the natural order, to which one must be inevitably resigned. The lesson seems to be relatively straightforward: Nature is not to be challenged or manipulated but only understood, and in the understanding is the security of knowing that suffering has purpose. Suffering is humankind's lot, and resignation to this fact confirms order and denies chaos.

A similar story was found among some primitive people of Hawaii (Campbell 1969:119-120). Again the land of the dead is reached through an opening in the ground. There the soul finds a tree with children gathered around it, and one side of the tree is fresh and green while the other is dry and brittle. The soul is to climb to the top of the brittle side and descend by the same side to await instructions from the children. The soul is then told to grasp a green branch, which, according to one version, breaks and falls into the underworld or, according to another version, breaks and drops the soul into annihilation.

Among these Hawaiians the departed soul may take a number of different routes. Some wander aimlessly over the land occasionally entering a living body, while others enter familiar animals where they might become guardians of the living. But those successful in negotiating the riddle of the tree are rewarded entrance to one of a number of comfortable abiding places according to rank, the highest of which is a paradise free of pain and suffering (Campbell 1969:120).

Campbell (1969) sees this latter story as being designed to comfort the older members of society as they face the prospect of death. The tree, with its duality of life and death, presents a riddle, the answer to which gives one entry to an afterlife that is essentially an extension of the familiar, which is a continuation of desirable attributes of this life. Those who do not understand the riddle are doomed to wander, their souls homeless, eager to abide temporarily wherever they can, in a human, a shark, an owl. But those who know the tree's meaning know the meaning of death and life. "Those who know the secret of death—which is that death is the other side of what we know as life" are able to succeed

in their trek to the underworld (119). And, of course, the answer to the riddle is given in every telling and retelling of the story. The listener is told what the soul must figure out in order to avoid annihilation and chaos.

The first story is more concerned with understanding life than with providing comfort in death. Through the dream, the father gives explanation for the seeming capriciousness of fate and thus reassures the listener against the fear of chaos and annihilation. A young person may anticipate a life of struggles, but that struggle is not without explanation, and that reason is given by the Great Chief Death himself. Thus, symbolically, death controls one's fate on this side of the divide rather than vice versa, that is, rather than one's actions in life controlling one's fate in an afterlife. The latter story, on the other hand, perhaps because its audience is comprised of those facing death, focuses attention on life beyond death and gives comfort to those seeking meaning and purpose in the twilight of life. Both stories, however, are glimpses into the cosmic order in which the storyteller and the listeners are unquestionably embedded, and both provide assurance that life's meaning and purpose is to live in harmony with that order.

The affirmation and reaffirmation of reality has, since the earliest primitive societies, included the construction of a myth regarding society's origins, and these primitive creation myths place the society within the natural order. As Diamond (1992:16) observed, "Every human society has felt a deep need to make sense of its origins, and has answered that need with its own story of the creation." Or, as per Leakey (1994:156),

> Every human society has an origin myth, the most fundamental story of all. These origin myths well up from the fountainhead of reflective consciousness, the inner voice that seeks explanations for everything. Ever since reflective consciousness burned brightly in the human mind, mythology and religion have been part of human history. Even in this age of science, they probably will remain so.

Of course a creation myth does much more than simply recount the facts of a people's origins; it establishes a group's meaning and justification in what might otherwise be a meaningless and chaotic universe. These creation myths form the foundation of the nomos and establish a link between the individual, the band, and the cosmos. Typically the origin myth of primitive peoples entailed the belief that the dwelling place of the tribe "was the navel of the universe where all creative powers poured forth" (Becker 1975:18). Thus, order was imposed on all of creation, and one's proper place in that order was firmly established at the center. In all probability, this primitive practice formed the substrate for all later cultural efforts to locate a center as a reference point, an anchor in the vastness of space and time.

Having located the center, much of everyday experience of both primitives and moderns occurs at the margins of the socially constructed reality and threatens the legitimacy of the cosmic order. The most disruptive of these marginal experiences is death, for death presents one with the possibility of complete and utter insignificance, and our primitive ancestors, living within nature as they did, would have experienced death continuously. Therefore, it should be no surprise that fear of the dead was "probably the most powerful force in the making of primitive religion" (Frazer [1922] 1963:vii), and a major function of the nomos since that time, whether sacred or secular, has been to furnish a plausible defense against the fear of the chaos signaled by death.

> The confrontation with death (be it through actually witnessing the death of others or anticipating one's own death in the imagination) constitutes what is probably the most important marginal situation. Death radically challenges all socially objectivated definitions of reality—of the world, of others, and of self. Death radically puts in question the taken-for-granted, "business-as-usual" attitude in which one exists in everyday life. Here, everything in the daytime world of existence in society is massively threatened with "irreality"—that is, everything in that world be-

comes dubious, eventually unreal, other than one had used to think. Insofar as the knowledge of death cannot be avoided in any society, legitimations of the reality of the social world *in the face of death* are decisive requirements of any society. (Berger 1967:43-44)

The demand for "legitimations in the face of death" would have been incessant in societies so directly dependent on the vicissitudes of the natural surroundings. Unable to avoid this "irreality" in their daily lives, much of their energy must have been directed toward creation and maintenance of a plausible narrative.

While the social world of the primitive may have been small by modern standards, one likely experienced his or her worldview as an expression of universal truth. When the nomos and the cosmos are coextensive, that is, when the meaningful order of the society is a reflection of the universe in which it rests, as is the case with tribal societies, what is believed to be true locally is likewise true universally. Therefore, the belief in some sacred supernatural force, which is common among primitive societies (James 1957:231; Parrinder 1971:33), reflects the universalizing nature of early human social experience. These forces animated the world and united all things–animal, vegetable, and mineral–in a nexus of interlocking relationships and transcended the divide between the living and the dead. Through ritual sacrifice tribes could access these forces and garner, for a time, superhuman powers. One could "accrue to himself a mystical body or soul which has immortal life," which is a practice perpetuated by Christians, among others, following the rise of civilization (Becker 1975:21). The desire to connect the individual to universal reality occurred very early in human history and established the model for transcending mortal existence. As Dobb (1995:37) noted, "The quest for unity long predates science, of

course, having been central to the monogenetic myths of prehistoric and aboriginal peoples as well as to the monotheistic religions that followed."

The first evidence of abstract laws and principles dates back roughly only 4,000 years. Thus, we may assume that our earliest ancestors did not make moral choices based on transcendent principles but rather on the demands of life in a small community dependent on nature's whim. Morality, therefore, was determined by collective perceptions of the dictates of the natural order, and violation of this order was risky business not only for the individual but also for the group. Key to their understanding of the world around them was the universal and perpetual rhythm of birth, life, death, and rebirth which blurred the divide between life and death and reinforced the belief that the world was inhabited by protean spirits existing in the realm between the quick and the dead. These spirits were capable of bringing either happiness or suffering to the community, depending on whether or not group members were living according to what was perceived to be the natural order. It seems, therefore, there would have been considerable pressure to conform to group will, a will that was in turn loathe to upset the delicate symbiosis between the material and spiritual worlds—between the living and the dead.

Morality, that is, rules regarding optimal functioning of the corporate body, also became a vehicle for conquering death. Ideas about moral behavior were closely linked to perceptions regarding collective survival and communal immortality. As Becker (1975:22) observed, humankind transmuted the simple quest for food into one for spiritual excellence and purity, a quest that continued into the civilized age and was not questioned until the modern age. Indeed, at the dawn of modernity Nietzsche (see Becker 1975:22)

observed "that all morality is fundamentally a matter of power, of the power of organisms to continue existing by reaching for superhuman purity." The substrate for this purity of which Nietzsche speaks may well have been laid down tens of thousands of years ago, with a major difference being that this superhuman purity was historically inseparable from communal purity.

To paraphrase Faulkner, for primitives the dead are never forgotten; they are not even dead. The world is teeming with life forces, which can blur the distinction between life and death and serve as a source of both fear and comfort to the living. The archaeological evidence of Upper Paleolithic cultures as well as the stories of contemporary hunters and gatherers both, in their own way, suggest a belief in the existence of some nonmaterial sacred force, which, according to Parrinder (1971:33), was a central feature of the earliest human religions. He said, "This [sacred power] may not have been personified, and so it would seem to have been a vague conception of providence as a creative and recreative power operating in the food quest, sex, fertility, birth, death, and the sequence of the seasons." That is, from very early in the life of our species there evolved a collective sense of some nebulous force existing outside the normal bounds of nature but capable of influencing otherwise natural events. This force may have been embodied in the spirit of a plant, animal, place, person, etcetera or simply held as a "vague conception" as Parrinder suggested. Whatever its manifestation, this concept of a sacred force was one of humankind's first efforts to get his mind around the great darkness of the unknown. Given the seeming universality of this concept among hunters/gatherers, it is hard to imagine (indeed one finds no evidence of such) nihilism to have been an option for our early

ancestors. All evidence suggests that the drive to create meaning far outweighs whatever capacity the human animal may have to entertain the possibility of meaninglessness.

We see the evidence of the belief in spirits or supernatural forces time and again in the stories and rituals of preliterate people, one of the most complete collections of which was compiled by James G. Frazer ([1922] 1963) in the early part of the twentieth century. One category of such stories involves the use of sympathetic or homeopathic magic, which attempts to exploit the relationship between things similar or closely associated (e.g., someone's hair, fingernails, or likeness). Things closely associated or similar in appearance are assumed to be connected by some unseen force, and by exploiting this force one can influence the well-being of another. Indeed, this practice was so pervasive among primitive peoples that Frazer (54) observed that "He [primitive humankind] is a slave, not indeed to a visible master, but to the past, to the spirits of his dead forefathers, who haunt his steps from birth to death, and rule him with a rod of iron." Death and life were partnered in a perpetual dance, and primitive people spent their lifetimes perfecting the steps. Magic proved to be a very effective theodicy for people who believed the universe was teeming with life.

For example, among the Dyak of Borneo, who subsisted on a strategy of hunting, gathering, and farming, a medicine man called to treat an illness may lie down near the patient as if dead. His body is treated like a corpse, bound, removed from the house, and placed on the ground. After an hour or so, other medicine men unbind him and he springs back to life. At this point the sick person is expected to recover as well (Frazer [1922] 1963:19). Because the dead can neither see, hear, nor speak, they can be homeopathically

employed to render others the same. So among the Galelareese, a group of hunters who lived on the northern part of Halmahera (a large island to west of New Guinea), a young man wanting to visit his girlfriend at night might sprinkle some dirt from a grave on the roof of a house to make the parents dead-like (34). Rainmakers of New Caledonia would sometimes blacken themselves all over, dig up a dead body, hang the skeleton in a cave, and pour water over it. It seems that the spirit of the deceased was then expected to make rain. Similar practices were conducted elsewhere (82-83). The Dieri of Central Australia believed the spirits of their fathers resided in certain trees, and these trees must be treated with the utmost respect. They protested settlers' attempts to cut down the trees in the belief they would anger the spirits who would bring upon them bad luck. Similar practices were found in other cultures as well (132-133). Some cultures believe the spirit dies with the tree, but others believe spirits can migrate from tree to tree. The inhabitants of the East Indian island of Siaoo believe sylvan spirits reside in certain trees and come out at the full moon to roam the countryside, and to pacify them they present them with animal offerings (134).

The art of the San people of southern Africa, some of which dates back 10,000 years, hints that the concept of sacred forces dates at least to the Upper Paleolithic (Leakey 1994:114-117). This long unbroken artistic tradition provides a window into the past. Many of the earliest San paintings were therianthropes (i.e., human/animal chimera), which had magical power, and one could draw on this power by simply placing their hands on the paintings. Given the similarity of these San creations to those left by Paleolithic

cultures, some have speculated that these too had a shamanistic function and that these prehistoric artists were indeed putting their spirit on the wall (118).

A related aspect of animism is the belief that natural entities are endowed with a soul (Solomon & Higgins 1997:46-47). We can only speculate as to what was in the minds of our primitive ancestors when they first toyed with the idea of the soul, but it is certainly plausible that the human soul was conceived as mankind's entry into the world of sacred forces. It was the individual's link to the universal life force that made possible what the Roman poet Lucretius referred to as "absorption into some immortal whole" (Wilson 1998b:65). The soul also became the vehicle for traversing the divide between people and things and between life and death (Durkheim [1912] 1947:51). But it was not entirely an individual, atomic soul, rather it was one more fluid and protean that could take many forms and migrate from the dead to the living and back again.

Through this concept of the soul, the life force, and the practice of ritual, our ancestors first gained transcendence and escaped the grasp of the Grim Reaper. As per Becker (1975:7), "by means of the techniques of ritual men imagined that they took firm control of the material world, and at the same time transcended that world by fashioning their own invisible projects which made them supernatural, raised them over and above material decay and death." Perhaps because this combination of control and transcendence has the potential to provide deliverance from annihilation in an almost endless variety of contexts, it has survived to the present. We still long for that ritual place in a community in which "even the humblest person [is] a cosmic creator" (14).

As suggested previously, the nomos generated by a given primitive society is very much influenced by the fact that such societies are small, homogenous, kin-based, and subject to very little social change. In a traditional tribal setting, individual identity is inextricably linked to one's entire society, a fact that influences perceptions of life's purpose, morality, death and afterlife. Subjective and objective reality are likely to exhibit a high degree of symmetry, suggesting that under such conditions the human animal evolved a predilection for group identity, universality, collective agreement as to the nature of life, and concordance between nomos and experience.

To speak of individuality in relation to primitive experience is problematic in that the concept as we understand it may have no meaning in the primitive context. In all likelihood, the present conceptual dichotomy between the individual and the social would be impossible for our earliest ancestors to understand. To whatever degree individual identity existed, thousands of generations of tribal life left the human animal with a predisposition to wed individual and corporate identities. "Tribalism establishes an individual's identity and significance as a person only in the context of his or her family and community" (Solomon & Higgins 1997:46). Indeed, much known tribal ritual has been calculated to further the interests of the group by suppressing individual identity. "These were often such as to create a great collective excitement, in which the individuals lost their sense of separateness and felt themselves at one with the whole tribe" (Russell [1945] 1972:11).

Across the vast experience of primitive social and cultural development, humankind's death fears and anxieties were calmed by this wedding of the individual to a corporate body. From what we know of African tribal traditions, "birth and death do not mark a

person's beginning and end. A newborn baby is not yet a person, while a deceased person who lives in the memory of his or her descendants is a person still, despite physical death" (Solomon & Higgins 1997:46). Indeed, this practice of mingling individual and group identity was inherited by religions following the appearance of civilization:

> It has been one of the chief aims of all religious teaching and ceremonial...to suppress as much as possible the sense of ego and develop that of participation. Such participation, in primitive cults, is principally in the organism of the community, which itself is conceived as participating in the natural order of the local environment. But to this there may be added the larger notion of a community including the dead as well–as, for example, in the Christian idea of the Church Militant, Suffering, and Triumphant: on earth, in purgatory, and in heaven. And finally, in all mystical effort the great goal is the dissolution of the dewdrop of the self in the ocean of the All: the stripping of the self and the beholding of the Face. (Campbell 1969:82)

In communal societies where the doctrine of individualism has not yet fully developed, survival depends on close cooperation and a common worldview. The individual would have few psychological resources to sustain himself or herself against death outside of the collective mythic sanctuary. As members of a homogeneous, totally integrated community that shared all life experiences in a physical and social world that remained relatively unchanged for thousands of generations, the human animal was a quintessentially social being. Consequently, personal misfortunes, even death, were mollified because they were "apprehended as only episodes in the continuing history of the collectivity with which the individual is identified" (Berger 1967:60).

The primitive relationship to the natural environment influenced ideas about morality, a universal life force, the nature of the soul, and the afterlife. "Primitive man observed nature and tried to discern in it what made the dance of life–where the power came from, how things became fecund....The primitive knew that death was an important

part of creation and so he embodied death in order to control it" (Becker 1975:17). Thus,

our earliest ancestors experienced immortality through their placement in a larger cosmic

order and through blood ties with a community, regardless of individual afterlife (Berger

1967:61-62).

> It is important to see that such a theodicy need not necessarily include any hope for
> an individual afterlife or immortality. Not only the individual's body but also his
> soul (if such is assumed) may disintegrate and perish—what remains, as the ulti-
> mately meaning-giving fact, is the eternal eurhythmy of the cosmos. Men and ani-
> mals, as individuals and in groups, participate in this and, by surrendering to it, can
> transpose their suffering and their deaths to a plane of inherently comforting cos-
> mic meaning.

Also characteristic of the religious beliefs and practices of small-scale, hunting and

gathering societies is the emphasis on collective social well-being and perpetuation of the

tribe rather than a concern with salvation (Turnbull 1983:274). While the story of a fall

from some previous state of innocence or perfection appeared in many times and places

before its incorporation into Hebrew myth (Frazer 1927:356-357), ideas of personal

redemption, nirvana, or enlightenment through adherence to some particular ideal appear

to be absent prior to this development. Perhaps more significantly, there is no apparent

evidence among primitive people of the promise of some totally individualistic achieve-

ment of personal bliss separate from one's earthly surroundings and community. We may

reasonably assume that primitive humankind experienced itself and its band as existing

within nature and, absent any sense of having separated himself or herself from the natural

order, they would need no institutions founded on stories of reconciliation with some all-

inclusive force. "Primitive man immersed himself in a network of social obligations for

psychological reasons" (Becker 1975:32), and "there is no conception of the individual as

sharply distinct from his collectivity" (Berger 1967:60). One may surmise that the impetus for individual salvation accompanied the weakening of the primitive social network, but this matter will be addressed more thoroughly in the discussion of civilization.

The first humans would likely have experienced relatively little discontinuity between subjectivity and objectivity, given the constancy of social life both within and across generations. Berger's (1967:15-16) theory regarding the objective and subjective dimensions of society may help illuminate this point. He argued that the process of socialization involves not only learning but also becoming a particular role. When one learns the particular objective statuses and roles assigned to them, such statuses and roles also obtain a subjective significance. For one is not really playing the role of mother, she becomes mother, thus blurring the distinction between objectivity and subjectivity. Socialization is successful when the subjective and objective worlds are congruent, that is, when there exists symmetry between the objective expectations of society and the subjective expectations of the individual. Societies that consistently fail to attain this symmetry would likely be hampered in their long-term survival. Primitive societies that survived relatively unchanged for thousands of generations likely achieved a high degree of subjective/objective symmetry, and this congruity would have been manifested in the socially constructed nomos. However, with each successive stage of social evolution this symmetry has become increasingly difficult to sustain. The differences between the subjective expectations of the individual and the objective expectations of society have grown, and the power of a single nomos to universally impart meaning to life has diminished.

The primitive nomos as prototype. As previously mentioned, all efforts to impose meaning on human existence have their origins in the primitive animism and supernaturalism practiced by our ancestors for all but the last few ticks of human history, and, as such, all nomoi constructed since the appearance of civilization are extensions of and variations on the essential characteristics of the primitive worldview. Of course, no social construction of life's meaning is static, and, just as contemporary ideas are continually changing, primitive nomoi must also have varied across place and time. Nevertheless, relative to social experience of the last 10,000 years, the primitive experience would have been remarkably stable for hundreds of thousands of years as all members of the species lived in small primary units that were almost totally subject to nature for their survival. Consequently, their defense against death would have been social and harmonious with nature and lived experience. Our earliest primitive ancestors established the human pattern of seeking defense against death in the company of like-minded people.

> The entire universe is pervaded by the same sacred forces, from *manna* in its original prepersonal form to the later animistic and mythological personifications. Thus the life of men is not sharply separated from the life that extends throughout the universe. As long as they remain within the socially established nomos, they participate in a universal being that also assigns "a place" to the phenomena of pain and death. (Berger 1967:61)

Thus, the human animal achieved optimal adaptation to death awareness (i.e., achieved maximum immortality power) in primitive conditions, and such conditions form the substrate of all subsequent attempts to come to terms with meaninglessness and death. Somewhere in the makeup of the human animal is a predisposition to share the understanding of life and the world around us with others and to have that understanding harmonize with personal and collective experience.

> When faith loses its singleness, its central role in life fades away, and with it the feeling that comes from knowing one's view of the world universally shared. When all around take fundamental ideas for granted, these must be the truth. For most minds there is no comfort like it. (Barzun 2000:23)

The human animal still struggles to identify with something larger than self—a family, gang, club, team, religion, profession, race, culture, nation, etcetera—in search of that vehicle that will carry him or her beyond this transient life. Indeed, struggle is the operative word because the immortality power of any such vehicle depends on the congruity between lived experience and the socially constructed meaning of that experience. As per neurophysiologist William H. Calvin (1996:13-15), our brains evolved to expect consistency between anticipated and actual experience, so it is reasonable to assume that our first prolonged efforts to explain and understand life's meaning would have reflected this propensity and adequately captured and expressed the view of every member of the community. Unfortunately, the ready congruity between understanding and experience all but vanished with the receding of primitive society, and the resulting tension between lived experience and the prevailing nomos has encumbered every religion, philosophy, and social theory since that time. As Becker (1975:25) observed, "the unfolding of history is precisely the saga of the succession of new and different ideologies of organismic self-perpetuation—and the new injustices and heightened destructiveness of historical man." Human history over the last 4,000 years is in large measure a history of our efforts to fit human experience into a somewhat incongruous story about that experience.

Because our initial adaptation to death awareness occurred in communities of no more than a few hundred people with whom we were connected socially, culturally, personally, physically, and psychically and because these conditions persisted for such a

broad expanse of time, these formative stories of death and life's meaning reflected and

anticipated relative uniformity of experience both within and between generations. Such

circumstances would have produced few if any challenges to the prevailing worldview,

and there would have been little if any variation in beliefs. There would have been no

dissenting voices, no heretics, and no schisms (Durkheim [1912] 1947:147; Redfield

1953:15). Indeed, even among contemporary hunters/gatherers, alternative beliefs are not

tolerated and expression of individual ego is not accepted (Turnbull 1983:274). For most

of our history humans would have shared a common and continuous understanding of

life's ultimate meaning, and the defense against the dread of meaningless and annihilation

would have been ineluctably communal. With no divisions, factions, or competing stories

obtaining over such a vast period of time, we would expect the cosmologies of our earliest

ancestors to be complete and unquestioned explanations of life's meaning. Thus, for a

period of adaptation lasting as long as several million years, the progenitors of modern

humans experienced life as a small group of kinsmen within a natural order that would

have been nearly uniformly perceived and understood. The expectation that others share

our worldview is one that was shaped by evolution and remains with us today in spite of

present obstacles to the creation of a plausible universal nomos.

Civilization

Characteristics. The second stage in societal evolution, civilization, was made

possible by the introduction of plant and animal domestication which ultimately led to the

reliance on agriculture as a subsistence strategy. Archaeological evidence points to

Southwest Asia as the site of the earliest plant and animal domestication around 11,000 years ago (Diamond 1999:100). From that beginning the practice grew both by diffusion and spontaneous appearance over the next 6,000 to 8,000 years. This earliest plant domestication involved the use of digging sticks or hoes, with full-blown agriculture appearing with the introduction of the plow and draught animals around 5,000 to 6,000 years ago. This domestication of food sources ultimately resulted in tremendous population growth, which had a profound impact on social organization and the social construction of meaning.

It should be noted that some writers argue that the pressures of population growth actually triggered domestication, the essential argument being that increasing populations of hunters/gatherers had to compete for space and that domestication of food sources proved an efficient response (Schmookler 1984:66). Which came first is, however, of little consequence to the argument put forth here. For what matters is that domestication made possible the exponential growth of human populations, the rise of human civilization, and the largely urbanized world we live in today.

Following the introduction of agriculture, societies grew dramatically not only in size but in diversity, creating dissonance between emergent conditions (i.e., lived experiences) and the nomos. "More changes in the human way of life took place in the period between 10,000 and 5,000 years ago than had occurred in the preceding three million years" (Farb 1978:126). The entire human experience to this time had taken place in small bands of blood-related hunters/gatherers, but, following the development of agriculture, the appearance of cities, and increased social stratification, human beings had to interact

with increasing numbers of people whose group identity and life experiences were markedly different from their own. Thus, stories generated in the *relatively* uniform and static social conditions of primitive societies were modified, and new narratives were introduced to accommodate new conditions. As Campbell (1962:46, 57) observed, with the turn from hunting to agriculture and animal domestication "the older mythological metaphors lost force [and] a new reading of the universe became socially operative." Or as per Berger (1967:19), "If one can imagine a society in its first origins (something, of course, that is empirically unavailable), one may assume that the range of the common nomos expands as social interaction comes to include ever broader areas of common meaning." Following the rise of the first civilizations, human beings were forced to be more vigilant in their search for a defense against chaos. Using Berger's metaphor, the sacred canopy needed to be reshaped and stretched to cover the larger and more diverse populations.

Domestication of the food supply signaled the beginning of sedentary existence and the appearance of much larger and more socially complex communities. While anthropologists may debate how these processes evolved, for purposes here it is only necessary to recognize that they did ultimately evolve in a kind of autocatalysis. Once established, intensified food production stimulated societal complexity, and societal complexity stimulated intensified food production (Diamond 1999:284-285). Villages became towns and towns became cities that were more socially complex and heterogeneous than anything previously experienced, and, as will be discussed later, these conditions called for an entirely new way of understanding life's meaning. At a very general level, "the food producing revolution and the urban revolution may be considered as two parts of one

great transformation," with the consequences of the former being realized by the latter (Redfield 1953:5-6). Kinship patterns became more complex, statuses and roles multiplied, and stratification increased. The inhabitants of towns and cities engaged in new kinds of economic activities, experienced much greater impersonality in their relationships, and experienced a new worldview (30). Furthermore, civilization gave birth to complex religious/political institutions around which these new hierarchical societies were organized.

While previous human evolution by definition entailed some degree of change, particularly after the appearance of Cro-Magnon man, the basic subsistence strategy remained unchanged until domestication of the food supply. However, following this development, the pace of change accelerated dramatically, resulting in a social reality unlike anything previously experienced. The primitive nomos, which had to satisfy only a small number of blood relatives in a relatively static universe, was forced to give way to new constructions intended to give meaning to larger numbers of unrelated people with more varied experiences, amidst continuously changing social conditions. For the first time in history, the human animal had to construct a nomos with a built-in capacity to accommodate significant social change.

The domestication of the food supply ushered in a profound alteration in humankind's relationship to nature. Hunters and gatherers, like all other living things, must ultimately rely on nature's whims for their survival. They can take no more resources from their environment than naturally available, and they are forced to adapt to these natural limitations of the food supply. To put it succinctly, they are entirely submissive to the

forces of nature, and their only hope of influencing those forces is through symbolic means. However, by definition domestication changed that relationship, for following domestication humankind could not only cajole the forces of nature but also exercise some degree of control over the food supply and experiment with growing and breeding techniques. Eventually the human animal was so successful at such manipulations that their very survival depended on it. That is, manipulation of natural processes became *the* essential element in the survival of the larger settled communities, without which they would disappear. While hunter/gatherer survival depended on a keen awareness of one's place in the ecosystem so as to avoid any violation of the natural order, horticulture and agriculture required a keen awareness of one's natural ecosystem so as to know how best to manipulate that system to maximum advantage. While gods may have been present in the cosmologies of some hunters/gatherers, they seemed to assume a somewhat different role following the rise of agriculture. Deities appeared not only as abstract symbols transcending local differences and linking disparate groups but also as mediators and guarantors in the unending struggle to coax sustenance from sometimes fickle nature.

Concurrent with this change in relation to their natural environment, these larger, complex, stratified, and heterogeneous societies began to change their means of maintaining cohesion and social control. Both the potential for conflict and the difficulty of its resolution are increased between strangers in larger groups (Diamond 1999:271). Whereas small groups can rely on social pressure to govern behavior, larger groups must introduce institutions. Anthropologist Ian Tattersall (1998:221) made this point quite well.

> We have already, long ago, begun reaping the consequences of population growth, not simply economically, but socially, too. The maximum human community size in which standards of behavior can be maintained simply by social pressures seems to

stand at about 150 individuals. Hunter-gatherer group sizes mostly lie well within this limit; but in settled societies it is soon exceeded. In an ideal larger society, individuals would get along with each other by voluntary compliance with social norms; but in practice, above this size limit, elaborate institutions–under which individuals frequently chafe and individual injustices abound–are needed to maintain society's cohesion.

Diamond (1999:273) placed the responsibility for these changes in social control

directly at the feet of population growth.

As regards population size, chiefdoms were considerably larger than tribes, ranging from several thousand to several tens of thousands of people. That size created serious potential for internal conflict because, for any person living in a chiefdom, the vast majority of other people in the chiefdom were neither closely related by blood or marriage nor known by name. With the rise of chiefdoms around 7,500 years ago, people had to learn, for the first time in history, how to encounter strangers regularly without attempting to kill them. Part of the solution to that problem was for one person, the chief, to exercise a monopoly on the right to use force.

Loss of the kinship connection forced a change in the nexus of social control, which in

turn called for an adjustment in the social construction of reality. The creation of some

new meaning was necessary to legitimize these new conditions.

Politico-religious institutions filled the niche created by this new type of social

organization. Beginning with the earliest known civilizations, we see a blending of relig-

ious beliefs and political authority in the person of a monarch positioned at the top of a

hierarchy of authority supported by religious belief. Each such society was a unified

system of culture based not on consanguinity but on a supersensory and superrational God

(or ideals in the case of Greece and the Far East) that Sorokin (1941:19) identified as

"ideational." Beliefs in a common nomos as well as in the authority of designated leaders

transcended growing differences between both individuals and groups and were therefore

beyond question. Again, as per Diamond (1999:278),

Besides justifying the transfer of wealth to kleptocrats, institutionalized religion brings two other important benefits to centralized societies. First, shared ideology or religion helps solve the problem of how unrelated individuals are to live together without killing each other—by providing them with a bond not based on kinship. Second, it gives people a motive, other than genetic self-interest, for sacrificing their lives on behalf of others. At the cost of a few society members who die in battle as soldiers, the whole society becomes much more effective at conquering other societies or resisting attacks.

Because they are more heterogeneous and pluralistic, societies after the rise of civilization required a new way of understanding reality. For the primitive, society was simply a microcosm of the divine order of the universe, a manifestation of *the* life force. "The social institutions of kinship then merely reflect the great 'family' of all being" (Berger 1967:34). However, with the rise of civilization and the diminished social significance and cohesive power of kinship, new sources of legitimacy were created. A new ideology was articulated that would "justify central authority, justify transfer of wealth, [and] maintain peace between unrelated individuals" (Diamond 1999:277). Some new means of connecting nomos and cosmos had to be found.

In the civilizations of eastern Asia the mythological legitimations were transformed into highly abstract philosophical and theological categories, though the essential features of the microcosm/macrocosm scheme remained intact....In Israel the scheme was broken through by the faith in a radically transcendent God of history, and in Greece by the positing of the human soul as the ground for the rational ordering of the world. The latter two transformations had profound consequences for religious legitimation, in the Israelite case leading to the interpretation of institutions in terms of revealed divine imperatives, in the Greek case to interpretations based on rationally conceived assumptions about the nature of man. Both the Israelite and the Greek transformations carried within them the seeds of a secularized view of the social order. (Berger 1967:34-35)

With the rise of civilization humans were at least potentially connected to people unlike themselves and whose life experiences varied significantly from their own. "Every society is engaged in the never completed enterprise of building a humanly meaningful

world" (Berger 1967:27), and the meaningful organization of a civilized society, that is, the social creation of a worldview that effectively defends against chaos in a diverse population, is problematic. At this moment in social evolution some plausible means was needed to link everyone in a given society, regardless of individual or group differences, to some transcendent source of meaning. At least three different categories of grand narrative emerged as means to this end: philosophy among the Greeks, theism among the Egyptians and later the Hebrews, and transcendent idealism in most of Asia. In each case the cosmos expanded beyond the primitive bounds of a single tribe to include everyone in a given society and, in some cases, beyond. Connection to a transcendent and immortal cosmic order, whether through the priest, the monarch, or the sage, provided the key necessary to unlock the power of immortality.

Furthermore, because the nomos could no longer be so easily construed as a microcosm of the universe, placement in the cosmic order could not be automatically accorded at one's birth. A new kind of order was introduced that allowed for a dichotomy between the sacred and the profane, creating a vehicle for distinguishing between the mundane interactions and activities (of these now heterogeneous societies) and those beliefs and actions critical to the life and immortality of the corporate body. The creation of the sacred introduced a way to cast the net of meaning and order over the larger collectivities and disparate groups that make up civilized society (that is, Berger's "sacred canopy") while leaving open to all a link to the cosmic order. "The cosmos posited by religion thus both transcends and includes man. The sacred cosmos is confronted by man as an immensely powerful reality other than himself. Yet this reality addresses itself to him

and locates his life in an ultimately meaningful order" (Berger 1967:26). In creating the

sacred order, "civilized" humankind put in place a new social construction that allowed for

the perpetuation of the microcosm/macrocosm scheme in the face of incongruous life

experiences. The latter could be relegated to the mundane, leaving intact the link between

the individual and the cosmos through the medium of a perpetual (i.e., immortal) social

order.

Along with the new nomoi came novel theodicies designed to facilitate the link

between the individual and this new cosmic order. New theodicies appeared following the

demise of primitive societies in order to harmonize experience with the necessarily recon-

structed nomoi.

> Theodicy by self-transcending participation is not limited to primitive religions. It
> typically continues, albeit in theoretically more refined forms, wherever the micro-
> cosm/macrocosm scheme prevails. For example, the Chinese peasant could die
> calmly in the assurance that he would live on in his descendants as his ancestors
> have lived on in him, but the Confucian gentlemen could have the same assurance
> legitimated further by reference to the fundamental *tao* with which his life and his
> dying were properly attuned. One may add that, generally, a similar *ad hoc* theo-
> dicy is operative whenever men fully identify with a particular collectivity and its
> nomos, on whatever level of theoretical sophistication. The primitive prototype
> thus continues historically in a variety of more or less complex modifications.
> (Berger 1967:63)

Both theistic religion and philosophy emerged as new theodicies composed of deities and

transcendent ideals to link the individual and the collective to a cosmic order. We will

return to this subject later.

The worldview necessary to support and sustain conformity to these new social

institutions differed markedly from that needed to reinforce social conformity among a

small homogeneous tribe of hunters/gatherers, for such a view needed to incorporate

values that transcended individual and group differences. Because kinship and uniformity of experience no longer united all members of society, universal principles were introduced to transcend divisions that now existed for the first time between members of the same social system. Truth was centered outside of nature, and deities appeared as mediators between humans and nature, the first evidence of which were the gods of ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt. The Greek pantheon appeared somewhat later and was eventually displaced by philosophy: a belief in inclusive principles without the anthropomorphized deities. A similar phenomenon occurred in the Far East with the appearance of inclusive idealistic religions such as Hinduism, Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. In each of these sequential historical developments, some abstraction—either in the form of deities or ideas—was introduced to overcome the barriers between people who no longer necessarily shared genes or experiences. Their stories of life and death reflected an effort to deal with this new diversity.

With the slow disintegration of tribal society, individual identity began to emerge. With collective identity no longer guaranteed, the human animal became more aware of its own individuality. While there is some question as to the degree of social agency passing to the individual before the late Middle Ages, the concepts of individual will and the soul are associated with a major shift in the nomoi occurring during the period of transition from primitive conditions to civilization. As anthropologist Robin Fox (2001:22) has noted,

> As levels of social complexity increased after the neolithic revolution, some 10,000 years ago, organisms would increasingly have been dealing with (relative) genetic strangers who made demands on them in the name of social units whose genes were not identical by descent with theirs. It is at this stage that true conflict would have occurred, as organisms started to feel the need to assert their "rights," that is,

the things they needed to do in order to ensure their fitness: the means of repro-
duction.

Whereas for all of previous human history, the individual's defense against chaos and
death was inextricably linked to community, after the rise of "ideational culture," to use
Sorokin's (1941) term, "salvation" became at least potentially an individual matter. With
the development of civilization, family and community were no longer synonymous, and
the individual was left with the choice of creating a substitute or constructing a story from
his or her own experience. For the first time in the history of the species, an individual
could seek life's meaning outside of an ascribed social group.

The new nomos: A principled universe. Whereas the world of our primitive
ancestors was populated by myriad spiritual forces, the universe of the civilized came to be
ruled by abstract principles, albeit often in the person of a deity. Tribal (i.e., local) har-
mony was no longer the focus of collective survival; that focus was now shifted to tran-
scendent authority, which was not bound by local tradition. As animistic forces were
swept away, the divide between life and death became more sharply focused, and the
defense against death came to rest in the nomos of a principled universe. To fend off chaos
it became necessary to construct and objectify a set of beliefs capable of independent
existence transcending all time and place.

With the coming of civilization we see increasing conflict over the social construc-
tion of meaning, a conflict that remains very much with us today. Whether in Northern
Ireland, the Middle East, Bosnia, or the growing arena of identity politics, the intensity
and persistence of conflicts over the social construction of meaning cannot be explained as

merely religious, political, or social differences. Rather, they have their origins in the first large, complex societies. They are expressions of something elemental, of what Becker (1975:5) described as the very essence of culture:

> The fact is that self-transcendence via culture does not give man a simple and straightforward solution to the problem of death; the terror of death still rumbles underneath the cultural repression....What men have done is to shift the fear of death onto the higher level of cultural perpetuity; and this very triumph ushers in an ominous new problem. Since men must now hold for dear life onto the self-transcending meanings of the society in which they live, onto the immortality symbols, which guarantee them indefinite duration of some kind, a new kind of instability and anxiety are created. And this anxiety is precisely what spills over into the affairs of men. In seeking to avoid evil, man is responsible for bringing more evil into the world than organisms could ever do merely by exercising their digestive tracts. It is man's ingenuity rather than his animal nature that has given his fellow creatures such a bitter earthly fate.

We may add to Becker's observation that with the rise of civilization "cultural perpetuity" was no longer a matter of securing food and shelter or even occasional conflict with other tribes; cultural survival now depended on perpetuation of a worldview in the face of threats by others to destroy that worldview and the culture itself.

We begin our look at this conflict over meaning with one of the world's first great civilizations, Ancient Egypt. Indeed, the very depiction of Egyptian gods seems to parallel the transition from hunting and gathering to agriculture. The majority of early Egyptian deities were not anthropomorphic but rather therianthropes, such as personages with the heads of beasts and birds affixed to the bodies of men and women. However, the great dynastic gods Atum, Ptah, and Amon-Ra were all of human aspect, and it may be that all the semihuman and animal gods were of predynastic origin. Perhaps there was some kind of evolution from prehistoric animal forms through half-human to human forms (White [1952] 1970:34). These animal forms may well have been holdovers from their days as

hunters and later adapted to conform to the conditions and needs of an agricultural society.

Regardless of the precise evolution of Egyptian deities, the very presence of these social creations marks a significant change in the way humans tried to make sense of their world. Deities represent a greater degree of objectification than present in animism. Gods may have relatively static personal and physical characteristics and serve as objects onto which universal human needs and fears may be projected. Gods may figuratively rise above tribal boundaries and serve as a point of reference for the increasingly diverse populations found in early civilizations.

The earliest efforts to adjust the construction of meaning to humankind's changed relationship to nature and to a larger and more heterogeneous population can be seen in the theism of ancient Mesopotamia as well. Plant and animal domestication began in the Tigris and Euphrates river valleys as early as 12,000 years ago (Campbell 1964:6) and laid the foundations for civilization. Somewhere around 5,500 years ago we see here for the first time the convergence of those characteristics we associate with civilized life: writing, mathematics, monumental architecture, scientific observation (of the heavens), and the art of government (6-7). It is also where we see a new kind of cosmology adjusting to the conflicts inherent in a larger more heterogeneous population. Indeed, one Sumerian myth refers to the wrath of the god Enlil, which was triggered in part by his inability to sleep due to "the noise caused by the multiplication of humankind" (Parrinder 1971:123). With the development of civilization, our world had changed forever, and we needed new stories consistent with these changing conditions if we were to overcome the dread of

insignificance without degenerating to either a state of overwhelming anomie or continuous conflict with strangers.

Greek civilization initially evolved theistic systems similar to those of Egypt and Mesopotamia but eventually produced an entirely new way of comprehending life's meaning and projecting order onto the chaos of a changing world. Like societies from Egypt to Mesopotamia, several thousand years of farming culture gave rise to large urban centers accompanied by a full pantheon and complex mythic explanations of life's meaning, but, whereas monotheism eventually emerged as the dominant model in the Near East, philosophy appeared in Greece as a new and different way of coming to terms with humankind's fear of chaos and the unknown. In the sixth century B.C.E., people had tired of mythology and for the first time began to employ reason and intellect to look systematically beyond gods and spirits to understand their world (Solomon & Higgins 1997:9). The Sophists had destroyed the faith of the youth in the gods, and rampant individualism was threatening to ruin Athens and make it vulnerable to the more disciplined Spartans (Durant 1961:7). The conflict over meaning, which is now so much a condition of postmodern life, was by then firmly established as a theme of civilized life.

By the middle of the first millennium B.C.E., a number of city-states had formed, and, relative to the surrounding countryside, had become places of increasing diversity and social intercourse. Greece had experienced an explosion in technology and "into the midst of an essentially feudal agrarian society of wealthy landowners and peasants came a new class of craftsmen, tradesmen, and technicians (Solomon & Higgins 1997:26). The old tribal and early agrarian cosmologies based on kinship and intimacy with the natural

environment apparently could not hold in such conditions, and some new means of

understanding man's place in the world was needed. That new means was philosophy, and

Durant (1961:2-3) described the conditions of its birth as follows:

> Traditions and dogmas rub one another down to a minimum in such centers of
> varied intercourse; where there are a thousand faiths we are apt to become skepti-
> cal of them all. Probably the traders were the first skeptics; they had seen too much
> to believe too much; and the general disposition of merchants to classify all men as
> either fools or knaves inclined them to question every creed. Gradually, too, they
> were developing science; mathematics grew with the increasing complexity of ex-
> change, astronomy with the increasing audacity of navigation. The growth of
> wealth brought the leisure and security which are the prerequisite of research and
> speculation; men now asked the stars not only for guidance on the seas but as well
> for an answer to the riddles of the universe; the first Greek philosophers were as-
> tronomers. 'Proud of their achievement,' says Aristotle, 'men pushed farther afield
> after the Persian wars; they took all knowledge for their province, and sought ever
> wider studies.' Men grew bold enough to attempt natural explanations of proc-
> esses and events before attributed to supernatural agencies and powers; magic and
> ritual slowly gave way to science and control; and philosophy began.

Perhaps the overriding issue for these first philosophers, like their theistic counter-

parts, was to envision some basis, other than simple utilitarian needs, for holding com-

munity and society together. If, as Becker (1975:4-5) argued, we are driven to seek self-

transcending meaning in society, a community held together by nothing more than practi-

cal considerations cannot long stand, for such a community can offer little protection

against insignificance. Therefore, Socrates and his successors directed much thought to

this issue of social cohesion in a society characterized by diversity, a topic to which we

will return momentarily.

Between increasing social diversity and the distancing from nature, early civiliza-

tions were confronted with the demand to create new sources of order. No longer was

order apparent as it had been in a homogeneous tribe embedded in a cosmic structure

undisturbed by social change. At the beginnings of Indian civilization, for example, there existed a belief in a principle of cosmic order according to which the king was supposed to rule (Campbell 1962:178). This order was both physical and moral, providing a standard for behavior and thus an element of social control. Such objectification was unnecessary for our primitive ancestors who were not just subject to some externalized natural order but also were part and parcel of that order. Having behaviorally adapted to the natural world for millions of years and cognitively and culturally adapted for tens if not hundreds of thousands of years, humankind's place in and understanding of that order would have been, it seems, internalized, unquestioned, consistent, and affirmed at every turn. There would have been little need to confirm its existence. For the civilized, who found them-selves in a much-altered environment, it became necessary to articulate this order and bolster it with the addition of deities or ideals and an institutional framework. In the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition "law presumes the presence of an all-powerful God who both dictated the laws and sanctions them, while both the Greeks and the Chinese, on the other hand, saw the sole end of ethics as the promotion of a harmonious society, quite apart from any external judge or lawgiver" (Solomon & Higgins 1997:23). But regardless of their various means, all civilizations of necessity generated some overarching source of social order and meaning. To step outside the world as religiously (or philosophically) defined was to step into a chaotic darkness, into anomie, and possibly into madness (Berger 1967:135). Maintaining a plausible definition of the world and minimizing conflict-ing worldviews required new techniques of inclusion, and these can be discerned in the reality construction of a number of early civilizations.

Transcending tribal boundaries: From ancient Egypt to Greece. A matter as

important as the legitimation of life cannot be ignored, so when competing traditions were

mingled there must have been considerable pressure to find some means of reconciling

their different traditions. What we see then at this point in human history is the introduc-

tion of various inclusive cosmologies. That is, the "dread of insignificance" compelled

humankind to generate stories about themselves that had the capacity to transcend the

boundaries of kinship and tribe by focusing on abstract principles and/or deities thought to

exist beyond the limits of tribal identity. Following the appearance of the earliest civiliza-

tions, there arose worldwide three new approaches to the understanding of life's meaning,

all of which contained the potential for transcending traditional tribal and social differ-

ences: theism, idealism, and philosophy. As previously noted, theism first assumed promi-

nence in the Near East, idealism was prominent in the Far East, and philosophy was

prominent in Greece.

By 5,000 years ago an agrarian lifestyle was established in the valley of the Nile,

and Egyptians from one end of the river to the other recognized a variety of gods repre-

senting various animals and natural elements. (Budge [1904] 1969:4). About 3,000 years

earlier, following the climatic changes and the receding of the ice caps, the first bands of

hunters/gatherers began to settle along the Nile, "probably of mixed Semitic, Bantu and

Berber stock, tribesmen from Hither Asia commingling with tribesmen from the African

interior" (White [1952] 1970:139). While each of these tribes brought with them their own

gods and myths, which were ultimately mingled, a number of them assumed significance

for the entire population of the valley.

Not long after the introduction of agriculture, this amalgamation of peoples settled into two distinct kingdoms defined by their relationship to the river: the Upper Kingdom where the Nile cuts a ribbon through the desert for 500 miles and the Lower Kingdom where the river breaks up and forms a delta on its final trek to the Mediterranean. These two kingdoms were then united in the fifth millennium B.C.E., creating one unified and stable culture lasting for more than 3,000 years. Thus, the culture of ancient Egypt was originally created out of the blending of many different tribes, each with their own culture and cosmology, but each dependent on the Nile for its survival. That is, everyone along this great river was washed in the same rhythms of sun, seasons, and annual floods and physically linked by the life-giving Nile, a situation ideal for agriculture and cooperation. Unlike Mesopotamia, where city-states often battled one another as well as foreign invaders, the Nile valley was relatively peaceful and serene (Strayer & Gatzke 1979:8). Consequently, Egypt established humanity's first nation dedicated to the coexistence and welfare of previously disparate peoples and tribes who were bound by a belief in common deities and embodied in a single figure, the Pharaoh.

One may reasonably conclude that the various tribal cultures that made up predynastic Egypt required some belief system or cosmology that had the power to transcend their local tribal identities and unite them as a single people, and the belief in common deities, along with a divine order personified by the king, would have provided just such a unifying force. As agriculture grew and populations increased, interaction would have become unavoidable, and the pressure would have mounted to subdue or accommodate one another. They obviously chose the latter path and mingled their local beliefs into an

inclusive cosmology that was legitimate for all of the inhabitants of the now larger and more diverse society.

Certain of the gods of Lower Egypt, such as Osiris, ultimately became dominant (perhaps because it had been more culturally advanced) (White [1952] 1970:31), and the Pharaoh, ruler of all of Egypt and the physical incarnation of the god Horus, became the embodiment of Egyptian society. The Pharaoh was a "man-god responsible for both the material and spiritual welfare of his subjects" and a descendant of the sun god himself, Ra-Atum (8). "The pharaonic principle, Pharaoh with a capital P, was an eternal, not mortal, being" (Campbell 1962:53). As such the Pharaoh not only unified all living subjects but also symbolized the unity of god and humankind and, because of his immortality, the unity of life and death as well. Egyptian civilization, then, represents one of the first instances in human history in which inclusive beliefs were formed to bring together different tribes holding differing views of the meaning and purpose of life.

In an increasingly cosmopolitan climate, the Greeks also began to create new kinds of communities that were not based on family, tribe, or some other consanguineous relationship supported by religion and myth but were based on reason. The form of social organization that eventually emerged from Greek civilization was the city-state. The city-state was based on a utilitarian social organization of interdependence in the satisfaction of material needs, but while utility may serve to unite disparate groups in cooperation it serves as a weak source of legitimation. Thus, other stories were necessary to satisfy the need for meaning. For example, Xenophanes proposed the elevation of a single god to prominence, thus appealing to the Greek sense of unity (Solomon & Higgins 1979:9).

Others sought meaning in the Orphic traditions and in the organization of "artificial communities" around Orphic religious beliefs. "Orphics...founded ...religious communities to which anybody, without distinction of race or sex, could be admitted by initiation, and from their influence arose the conception of philosophy as a way of life" (Russell [1945] 1972:23-24). Thus, as philosophy emerged, reason and intellect moved the gods to the background, and the first scientific theories of nature were introduced (Solomon & Higgins 1997:4), which were not to be fully realized for another 1500 years. The Greeks introduced reason as a foundation of societal legitimacy.

The philosopher's task, then, was to create a new story to capture the hitherto unknown experience of civilization, which was a daunting task then and even more so today. All primitive cosmologies were products of a lengthy organic process evolving within the context of small, homogeneous groups linked by kinship, tradition, and common life experiences, which were conditions no longer extant in civilized society. Philosophy, on the other hand, was created over a relatively short span of time within a complex and heterogeneous social system; therefore, philosophical principles, like religious beliefs, needed to be broad enough to appeal to somewhat disparate populations but specific enough to have relevance for the lives of the various segments of that population. Failure to balance these two conflicting goals would render one's efforts meaningless and question the purpose of the entire human enterprise. As Nisbet (1982:6) observed, from Plato to Hobbes and Rousseau we see the conscious effort to create the ideal community "which would save man from chaos and anarchy." These philosophers and others, along with theologians from Augustine to Luther, viewed the world as being rife with conflict, which

only the soothing balm of community could contain. Having come of age in tribal communities in which conflicts over the meaning and order of the universe would probably have been rare, the human animal does not rest comfortably with an unsettled nomos. Chaos lurks in the shadows.

One problem faced by philosophy in its effort to give legitimacy to complex, heterogeneous societies is likewise faced by all such efforts, including religion. Religious nomoi will be dealt with in more detail later, but it may be useful at this point to inject Berger's (1967:134) observations regarding the dilemma faced by religion today in creating and sustaining communal legitimacy:

> In other words, insofar as religion is common it lacks "reality," and insofar as it is "real" it lacks commonality. This situation represents a severe rupture of the traditional task of religion, which was precisely the establishment of an integrated set of definitions of reality that could serve as common universe of meaning for the members of a society.

While Berger is referring to conditions of pluralism in modern society, the basic dilemma facing all efforts to give legitimacy to large-scale societies has been with us since the appearance the first civilizations. Religion, or even philosophy, may have had an easier time legitimizing earlier societies in which there existed greater harmony between the nomos and lived experience, but the seeds of disharmony were present in the first settled communities and were destined to mature.

Nisbet (1982:vii) asserted that "the quest for community is the master theme of Western [philosophical] efforts during the past twenty-five hundred years to reconcile individual and society." The human animal is both a unique, self-aware individual and a social creature, and much of the human experience is an expression of the tension between

these two realities. For most of hominid history there was little if any tension between the self-aware individual and his kin group. As previously discussed, individual identity as we understand it did not likely exist, but, with the coming of civilization and the disintegration of those former tribal ties, individuality increased, and one result of this increased individuality was tension between the individual and society. "Throughout [its] long development, from 600 B.C. to the present day, philosophers have been divided into those who wished to tighten social bonds and those who wished to relax them" (Russell [1945] 1972:xxii), that is, those with communal leanings versus the more individualistic. If the human animal, through 7 million years of trial and error, had achieved an optimal balance between the needs of the individual organism and those of the group, civilization, with its increasing numbers and multiplying individual stories, upset that balance. In upsetting that balance civilization introduced a dilemma that has occupied philosophers from Socrates to Derrida.

Many early philosophers seemed to be searching for something to anchor humankind in this sea of change and to balance the interests of individuals and provide a stable foundation for a fluid society. The first philosophers searched for some underlying universal substance or form. In the sixth century B.C.E. Thales, said to be the first philosopher, posited that underlying everything is an unchanging substratum. Otherwise, how could we name or even conceive of anything? Although we do not know exactly what he meant, his candidate for this unifying substratum was water (Van Doren 1991:32-33; Mathews 1995:869). Thales' student, Anaximander, rejected the water theory but not the search for universals, and his student, Anaximenes, did likewise. These philosophers and others of

their kind were labeled materialists because they thought the world was made of some basic substance.

Among those seeking universal forms, on the other hand, was Pythagoras. The Pythagoreans were attracted to mathematics, in part because of its universal application. A mathematical proposition that was true in Greece was equally true in Egypt, and so on (Solomon & Higgins 1997:28-29). In the midst of uncertainty and change, they, like the theists before them, sought some force and some unifying theme or thread that they could follow to its source and find meaning in a world in which continuity and uniformity no longer prevailed.

While earlier Greek philosophers were concerned with the nature of the physical world, Socrates was the first to turn his attention to the mind of humankind (Durant 1961:6). Yet, if we accept the writings of Plato regarding his teacher, he was no less concerned than his predecessors with determining the existence of some universal substratum on which to build a cohesive and continuous social life. As previously stated, the Sophists had challenged belief in the old gods, while Athens was vulnerable to dominance by the Spartans, and Socrates appeared to be very much concerned with finding some means of holding his society together.

Socrates located the foundation of human social cooperation and discourse in fundamental truths and believed that social cooperation could be a byproduct of enlightened self-interest (Durant 1961:7-8). He believed there were real, objective values grounded in truth and that reason could be used to discover these elemental truths, one of the most important of which was virtue (Warmington & Rouse 1956:281-311; Solomon &

Higgins 1997:34-35). Virtuousness and the ability to see the truth require training and discipline, but presumably anyone, regardless of class or gender, could, according to Socrates, become virtuous (Van Doren 1991:44) through "divine dispensation" as per Plato's dialogue between Socrates and Meno (Warmington & Rouse 1956:28-68). In other words, basic virtues existed outside of any particular tribe or social group and thus served to anchor diverse groups to a common center. Fundamental truths replace the genetic substrate around which community could be formed and sustained.

Morality is the medium through which individuals and society negotiate their differences. Primitive religion provides, among other things, the substance of that medium and is quite effective because everyone adheres to the same religious beliefs. One finds transcendence because the links between self, community, and universal truth are reinforced at every turn. However, when there are differences in class, experience, belief, and so on, morality must be constructed of something other than kinship. Socrates suggested an abstraction, that is, reason (enlightened self-interest), as a substitute. He doubted the power of a moral code based on theology alone to provide the cement necessary to "make willful individuals peaceful citizens of the community." What would tame the self-interest of the nonbeliever? Rather, if human beings, through reason, were able to see the distant consequences of their actions, they might create a harmonious world with few societal restrictions needed (Durant 1961:7-8). Socrates then employed reason to construct just such a harmonious society, as laid out in Plato's *Republic*.

Socrates likewise employed reason in his approach to death. He reasoned it would be unwise to fear death because we have no way of knowing it is not better than life

(Russell [1945] 1972:87). He did not stop there, however, in building a defense against annihilation. Socrates believed his principals to be in accord with God's laws, which superseded those of humankind, and he envisioned a dualism of heavenly soul and earthly body, giving him mastery over death (87, 91). He also foresaw an afterlife of uninterrupted thinking and an eternity of philosophizing, making the virtuous individual fearless of evil and death. Because the soul belongs to "the world of Being," we have innate knowledge of the good. Therefore, the soul is "the conduit of intellectual and moral life" (Russell [1945] 1972:89; Solomon & Higgins 1997:39). For Socrates, abstract but fundamental truths could provide a social or communal foundation where kinship once lay.

Because most of what we know of the thoughts of Socrates was given to us by Plato, their ideas are inextricable. However, perhaps because he recorded his ideas, Plato seems much more deliberate in his creation of a new story to give meaning to this ever more complex type of human community. Plato saw Greece in intellectual, moral, and social disarray, and "The single greatest objective of [his] entire life...was to find a secure and timeless form of reality, which would not be dependent upon the winds of doctrine and the shifting tides of fashion" (Nisbet 1982:7). This timeless reality would be defense against the dread of chaos and meaninglessness in a social system in which the old truths of kinship and communal identity no longer held.

Plato built this new story on a belief in the "Good." He believed that through the proper combination of wisdom and discipline wise men could create a world on the model of heaven: one defined by the Good and having "a minimum of change and a maximum of static perfection" (Russell [1945] 1972:106). The substrate of this society was permanent

ideal forms created by God (Solomon & Higgins 1997:37), who was not the creator of all

things but only Good things (Russell [1945] 1972:109). Plato proposed the use of reason

to create a community that would satisfy the aspirations of men and women in accord with

timeless truth and goodness (Nisbet 1982:8), and he argued that wise men could achieve a

compromise among the many competing interests of classes, nations, etcetera (Russell

[1945] 1972:107). Twenty-three hundred years ago the center had already lost its hold on

the collective consciousness, and Plato seemed committed to recreating one.

In the growing contest between the individual and the community, Plato believed

the individual interest should be subordinated to the common good (Solomon & Higgins

1997:38). Individualism created disharmony in the political community, but surrender to

that community offered the individual something unattainable through individual pursuit; it

offered liberation from ego concerns. It seems he thought he could create a community in

which humankind's natural instincts were brought into harmony with the social order

(Nisbet 1982:9-10). Justice "is the harmonious articulation of all individual parts into a

rational and aesthetic whole" and "is the sign of health in both individual organism and

political community" (11).

In proposing such a view, Plato was expressing a long-held Greek idea. Before

philosophy, Greek religion and ethics were founded on a belief that everyone and every-

thing, even the gods, had their appointed place and function in the universe, and caution

had to be exercised so as not to upset this natural order. "It is the source of the belief both

in natural and in human law, and it clearly underlies Plato's conception of justice" (Russell

[1945] 1972:11, 114). In the face of emerging individualism, Plato sought a means of

reconciling the individual with the advancement of social welfare in the face of increasingly diverse human experience.

Like his teacher, Aristotle sought some rationale and some tools for sustaining and maintaining harmony and cooperation in a society made up of disparate groups and interests, although some of his ideas differed markedly from those of Plato. Aristotle was "a professional teacher, not an inspired prophet" (Russell [1945] 1972:161), but, like philosophers who came before him, he was obviously concerned with convincing his countrymen to make proper choices among alternative perceptions and worldviews. Unlike Plato he was an empiricist and a pluralist who based his idea of community on dissimilarity and believed any form of government was fine as long as it preserved the autonomy of the major groups and institutions (Nisbet 1982:16-22). He believed Plato was mistaken in arguing for the transfer of the kind of community built around a small group, a family, or a village to the state, thus establishing a position held by pluralist down to Burke and Tocqueville (Rieu 1962:55-72; Nisbet 1982:21). Aristotle argued that such bonds cannot directly provide the cohesion necessary to unite a diverse population, but he shared Plato's elitism, believing the best government was a monarchy or an aristocracy (Russell [1945] 1972:176-177).

Aristotle's philosophy is teleological: he was concerned with final causes and believed "purpose governs the course of development in the universe" (Russell [1945] 1972:182), and happiness is the pursuit of our purpose through reason and logic (Solomon & Higgins 1997:41-42). Although his arguments were from his own intellect, they were not unlike religious theistic stories in their scope and purpose. God is the Unmoved

Mover, the First Cause, the originator of motion (Russell [1945] 1972:168; Solomon & Higgins 1997:42). Like the belief in a Supreme Being, Aristotle's concepts cast a broad net. These principals applied to Athenians, Macedonians, and Spartans alike and provided a rationale for the Greek class system. It is not difficult to imagine Aristotle as a man driven to give meaning to life and to those of his fellow Greeks when he argued that happiness lies in virtuous activity, and the best activity is God's activity–contemplation (Russell [1945] 1972:181).

Under this umbrella of God's own reason, Aristotle maintained that the highest kind of community is the state, followed by the family and the village, and that the State both sustains and perpetuates virtue. The virtuous person is a happy person, because with reason and virtue as values one's desires will always be in accord with what one ought to do. Consequently, a society of virtuous citizens can live happily and harmoniously regardless of differences. Without the State there is no law, and without law man is the worst of animals. The State then is the union of families and villages and the vehicle necessary for an honorable life (Russell [1945] 1972:176-194). While he arrived at his destination via a different route, Aristotle's purpose seems no different from Plato's: the pursuit of some rationale for social harmony and an overarching canopy of meaning to which all individuals are linked through proper social intercourse.

There were of course many philosophers to follow Aristotle: Epicurus, who maintained the goal of the wise man is to seek tranquillity free from the fear of death, and the Stoics, who believed that one could minimize suffering by minimizing desires and there many other writers too numerous to mention (Solomon & Higgins 1997:44). But again,

my intent is not an exhaustive review of the history of philosophy. Rather, I wish to demonstrate that the birth of philosophy in sixth century Greece marked the beginning of a new approach to understanding life's meaning and coming to terms with mortality, an approach based in the mind of humankind and not the actions of gods. The philosophical search for a center has been a search for meaning and for some grand story that banishes chaos from the camp. Over the years various thinkers have combined reason and religion in an effort to enhance their chances of avoiding chaos and comprehending life's meaning, while others have flatly rejected one approach or the other, but the pursuit has never been interrupted.

Ancient Hebrews. Like the gods of Mesopotamia and Egypt, the reach of the Hebrew deity eventually extended beyond a single tribe to embrace multiple peoples and bring cohesion to an otherwise diverse group. Exactly who the Hebrew people were is unclear, but the name seems to have been given to "an amalgamation of diverse peoples" living in and around the region of Syria-Palestine in the second millennium B.C.E. "Calling them 'Hebrews' was an early means of distinguishing this new entity from other existing ethnic groups" (Knight 1993:274), and a new Hebrew cosmology strengthened this identity. As the population grew and spread, the nomos did likewise. "The Bible moves from a restricted view of God as a national deity to a more universal conception of him as the God of all nations which are but instruments in his hand" (Parrinder 1971:386). Armstrong (1993:16) also noted this transition and suggested that God's promise to Jacob that he protect him when he left Canaan is an indication that Canaan's God was now

taking on universal significance. Indeed, in Genesis (12:3, 18:18,) and (21:21) it is declared "the covenant with Abraham is also a blessing for all the people's of the earth and especially a bond of religious unity with his other descendants, the Ishmaelites." And even this story could have been modified over time as "a retrojection of a later tribal unity" (North 1993:5). Like other nomoi, as their actual and potential adherents became increasingly cosmopolitan, the Hebrew story was threatened by new interpretation, faction, and division, and believers have struggled against these centrifugal forces for three millennia. A thorough account of the transition to Judaism and the subsequent theological debates is beyond the scope of this paper (not to mention this writer) and unnecessary to the thesis. The simple fact that debate has continued for 3,000 years is evidence of the inherent conflict in expanding a nomos to accommodate the experiences of a broad range of people without doing violence to the beliefs that give life meaning in the first place.

While Abraham is considered theologically the patriarch and therefore first of the Hebrew prophets, it was Moses who gave us the Hebrew story—a story that was possibly motivated by a need to address the confusion of an increasingly cosmopolitan world. In such a world, the certainty of belief is challenged through contacts with the stories of other peoples as well as through the increasingly varied experiences of people belonging only nominally to the same nation. Moses may have understood this threat more than most, for as Armstrong (1993:23) observed, "Prophets like Moses preached the lofty religion of Y...h, but most of the people wanted their older rituals, with their holistic vision of unity among the gods, nature and mankind." Given the increasing political nature of life in the ancient Near East (as amply demonstrated by the Egyptian captivity), Moses may

have sensed the tenuousness of such a holistic vision and sought to defend his people against the threat of cultural if not physical annihilation. Either eventuality would destroy their culturally constructed defenses against the dread of meaninglessness.

An essential feature of the beliefs and gods of civilized peoples is the extension of their authority over unrelated groups and their association with laws governing behavior. As individual tribes coalesced into large settled villages, villages became cities, and cities became nations, deities appeared who held dominion over these larger populations and became the purveyors of the laws governing these new complex more socially diverse societies. For example, "Enlil, though associated with Nippur, was considered the supreme god of all Sumer, and held the tablets by which the fates of all people were settled" (Parrinder 1971:115). Perhaps the oldest known legal code is that of Hammurabi, king of Babylon around 2100 B.C.E., who asserted that the law had been given to him by god (Russell [1945] 1972:5). Unlike the spirits of hunters and gatherers, gods united people not bound by blood or tribe and created a cover of common belief where commonality might otherwise be shallow. These deities symbolically represented unqualified principles and ruled according to a physical and natural order (Campbell 1962:178; Campbell 1964:13) and, as such, replaced kinship as a source of cohesion and meaning for the new larger and more heterogeneous societies.

The next great transformation in the belief systems of the Near East came with the appearance of monotheism among the Hebrews, whose origins are traced to the Biblical story of their Exodus from Egypt some 3,000 to 4,000 years ago. Where Babylonians and Egyptians perceived multiple deities with specific overarching powers (albeit with a single

god often perched at the top of the hierarchy), the Hebrews ultimately focused their gaze on a single God, to the exclusion of all others. According to Festinger (1983:130-131), monotheism would have offered little attraction to most of the inhabitants of the ancient Near East. In fact, the Egyptian, Amenhotep III, had tried it with little success. Festinger argued that people had ample evidence of multiple deities, since various gods had been "known" to have controlled events and win battles, etcetera. Belief in a single god was the equivalent of putting all eggs in one basket and "would have presented a psychologically uncomfortable situation." Festinger maintained that monotheism took hold among the Hebrews because they were "a relatively small collection of people recently uprooted from Egypt, where the gods had not particularly favored them, now wandering in the Sinai desert, isolated from the major trends and beliefs of the time." It is conceivable, therefore, that people living in such marginal relationship to the prevailing nomos would construct an alternative story in which their God existed above all others and in which they were His chosen people. For all previous human history, nomoi were created to validate personal and tribal existence, thus it is understandable that early Hebrews were compelled to either surrender their identity and be absorbed into some other nomos or construct a new story affirming their identity and place in the cosmos.

In the first millennium B.C.E., profound changes were taking place both in the East and West that called for a new understanding of life's meaning and changes that resulted in greater social diversity and complexity than ever before experienced. As Armstrong (1993:27) observed,

> The period 800-200 B.C. has been termed the Axial Age. In all the main regions of the civilized world, people created new ideologies that have continued to be crucial and formative. The new religious systems reflected the changed economic and

social conditions. For reasons that we do not entirely understand, all the chief civilizations developed along parallel lines, even when there was no commercial contact (as between China and the European area). There was a new prosperity that led to the rise of a merchant class. Power was shifting from king and priest, temple and palace, to the marketplace. The new wealth led to intellectual and cultural florescence and also to the development of the individual conscience. Inequality and exploitation became more apparent as the pace of change accelerated in the cities and people began to realize that their own behavior could affect the fate of future generations. Each region developed a distinctive ideology to address these problems and concerns: Taoism and Confucianism in China, Hinduism and Buddhism in India and philosophical rationalism in Europe. The Middle East did not produce a uniform solution, but in Iran and Israel, Zoroaster and the Hebrew prophets respectively evolved different versions of monotheism. Strange as it may seem, the idea of "God," like the other great religious insights of the period, developed in a market economy in a spirit of aggressive capitalism.

Both Christianity and Islam followed from Judaism as variations on the theme of prophetic monotheism. Had Judaism been able to accommodate the experiences and sensibilities of the marginal Jews and Gentiles of Palestine and encompass the peoples of the Arabian Peninsula, there might have been no pressure for the formation of alternative religions in these regions. But this entire monotheistic tradition was marked from the very beginning by seemingly endless variety and permutation as various groups—political, social, cultural, ethnic, economic—struggled for an interpretation of a central story that would be broad enough to accommodate the varied experiences of a relatively large complex society without losing its relevance.

Christianity. People everywhere struggled for a story to make sense of the times, and Christianity, through some rather simple principles and a complex evolution, eventually proved to be an effective adaptation. By not restricting membership to any particular group and instead promoting a set of moral and ethical principles, Christianity was able to

transcend the normal boundaries of tribe, culture, class, politics and ultimately embrace virtually anyone willing to accept the Christian story. "As many historical scholars have pointed out, Christianity...dipped back into paganism, into primitive communalism, and extended it beyond the tribe" (Becker 1975:69). Christianity attempted to cope with emerging individualism by forming a new integrated cosmogony wherein the individual's "love of neighbor" results in an individually based communal principle. Christianity expanded the tent by making room in its nomos for both individualism and communalism, which is an adaptation that has proven to be remarkably successful. Christianity has offered a very large and diverse group of followers a safeguard against the dread of insignificance.

Christianity incorporated a number of beliefs, which had the effect of overcoming the divisions between the inhabitants of the increasingly diverse societies of the era. The early Christians simply borrowed from the Jews the concept of the church or congregation to mean a single church but expanded it to include the whole body of Christians (Parrinder 1971:423). Applying the term to both an individual congregation as well as to the entire Christian community had the effect of not only giving identity to the small congregation of people who may well have shared other attributes and experiences but also solidifying their link to the entire corporate body (or tribe). Given the varied experiences of local churches, it is not surprising that this link has, as Walls (1984:102) pointed out, always been marked by tension, but it has been supported by acceptance of some basic beliefs, such as the resurrection, which transcend not only tribal differences but also our very understanding of the physical world. For people otherwise divided by nation, culture,

tradition, geography, and life experience, the symbol of the crucifixion and the resurrection provided a potent centerpiece around which to build a common story. Early Christians appropriated the theme of death and resurrection, a theme not uncommon in the folklore of the time (see Frazer [1922] 1963), and constructed over the course of several hundred years a story containing the potential for universal appeal. By basing membership in the community on belief in a nomos rather than vice versa, Christianity established a new model for carving meaning out of an increasingly complex and heterogeneous world.

As the Roman Empire fell into decline, Christianity rose in its place throughout most of Western Europe and proved an adequate substitute for the local kinship-based identities, which were earlier destroyed by migration and warfare. The use of Latin in liturgy and education further strengthened the bond as identity with the old Roman Empire was "preserved in the idea of an Empire of Christ, to whom all Christian princes and peoples owed allegiance" (Walls 1984:62). By the fourth century a guiding principle of the Christian faith was its universality, "a natural product of the doctrine that the apostles taught the same faith everywhere" (61), and the symbol of the universal Savior was quite effective as a center around which an otherwise disparate group could coalesce. Whereas Jews may have believed they were commanded by God to save themselves, if not all of humanity, through adherence to the Law, Christians believed they were commanded by God to save humanity by becoming Christians and convincing everyone else to do the same. Being a Christian included adherence to God's Law, but one could expect little protection from the dread of insignificance in a chaotic universe by following the latter without becoming the former.

Islam. Islam arose from the revelations of a single prophet, Mohammed, from the city of Mecca in Western Arabia in the seventh century. Mecca was at the crossroads of north-south and east-west trade routes, and due to its strategic location many of its new inhabitants had become wealthy and self-sufficient, which is a phenomenon previously unknown in the harsh conditions and tribal culture of Arabia. For thousands of years nomads had lived at the edge of extinction, and survival dictated that the tribe always took precedence over the individual. Now people were prospering to the point that some even imagined their wealth could bring them a certain immortality (Armstrong 1993:133). As a result of these changing economic and social conditions, pressures began to mount for a new nomos to bring some order to the threatening chaos.

Adding to the pressure for change, the people of Arabia were surrounded by powerful empires against whose exploitation they were unable to unite because of their tradition of tribal warfare (Armstrong 1993:134). This was the world into which Mohammed introduced Islam. "Mohammed was convinced that unless the Quraysh learned to put another inclusive value at the center of their lives and overcome their egotism and greed, his tribe would tear itself apart morally and politically in internecine strife" (33). By the seventh century many people were becoming increasingly dissatisfied and spiritually restless, as the nomos that had served tribal society so well for centuries was unable to address changing social conditions.

Arabia was at the time polytheistic, and Allah was but one of many deities, albeit a superior one, worshipped around Mecca (Parrinder 1971:464; Solomon & Higgins 1997:57). Conflict between tribes was the norm, and Mohammed realized that traditional

tribal allegiance somehow must be transferred to a larger corporate body, and an idea well-fitted to this task was monotheism. "Mohammed knew that monotheism was inimical to tribalism: a single deity who was the focus of all worship would integrate society as well as the individual" (Armstrong 1993:149). Monotheism shifted the locus of ultimate meaning and purpose to a single deity, thus overcoming the need for distinct tribal identity; the defense against chaos was no longer a zero-sum-game pitting one tribal version of ultimate reality against all others. The Koran (translated by A. Yusuf Ali) reflects this feature of Islam in Sura 3.103:

> And hold fast,
> All together, by the Rope
> Which God (stretches out
> For you), and be not divided
> Among yourselves;
> And remember with gratitude
> God's favor on you;
> For ye were enemies
> And He joined your hearts
> In love, so that by His Grace,
> Ye became brethren;
> And ye were on the brink
> Of the Pit of Fire,
> And He saved you from it.
> Thus doth God make
> His Signs clear to you:
> That ye may be guided.

As a result of Mohammed's message, warring tribes were able to unite around a single cosmology. Islam erected a larger cosmological tent whose basic components, with the exception of its inclusivity, were quite similar to those tribal beliefs with which the population was already familiar. That is, Islam incorporated much of the earlier tribal culture by abstracting that tribal identity to an inclusive level, to Allah and to His message

as revealed to Mohammed. Islam simply substituted for all former tribal allegiances (Farah 1970:24). Whereas earlier Bedouins had found defense not only against physical death but also against meaninglessness and chaos in their intense loyalty to their tribe, Muslims found this same defense in their intense loyalty to the tribe of fellow believers.

Whereas Christianity adapted to growing individualism with the doctrine of neighborly love, Islam's response was more reactionary. Perhaps due to the differing political positions of early Christians and Moslems (the former had no territory and no power), the latter interpreted individualism as a threat and opted for a return to earlier communalism. Individualism was not brought into the new nomos.

Islam had a powerfully unifying effect, and in this regard, that is, the stress on communal solidarity, it more closely resembled the Jewish experience than the Christian (Farah 1970:1, 7-9). The nets of Judaism and Islam were woven from stretched or expanded tribal, ethnic, and cultural material, which would account for the strong communal message contained in these two stories. Christianity, on the other hand, very early in its evolution set aside traditional definitions of community and embarked on, what was for the Western world, a new path toward community building: one based on adherence to an abstract set of principles as related by God, not to or even through any particular culture, but to all of humanity. One could make the case that contemporary Judaism and Islam do likewise, but their routes to this point were largely through their own familiar cultural territories.

The new communities. The creation of communities based on abstractions rather than biology opened the door to new variations in the construction of meaning and elevated the importance of the individual in this process. The individual, while still very much influenced by his or her social environment, could for the first time choose whether or not to believe or participate in, the creation and recreation of the nomoi. The harmony that had always existed between individual and collective experience and the nomos no longer held, and choices had to be made. Beliefs that had been since the dawn of human history an intrinsic part of one's identity were now, at least in some small measure, a matter of choice. While the choice of nomoi may have been more collective than individual, the human animal was for the first time in a position to choose among various versions of the ultimate meaning and purpose of life. The Hebrews chose from elements of the prevailing Egyptian cosmology, while Christians chose from those elements of Judaism that seemed to best fit their experience, and Moslems did likewise, choosing from both Judaism and Christianity.

The role of the prophet. With the advent of these new more diverse societies and the heightened importance of choice, a new role appeared in the milieu of reality construction: that of the sage or prophet. Certainly primitive cultures produced individuals with a stronger than normal connection to the spiritual world, but their principle role was not the promotion of a particular worldview. The role of the prophet was to guide people, albeit more collectively than individually, to the right judgments about the nature of realty, that is, to the truth. In the Jewish tradition, for example, the prophet Elijah, in the eighth

century B.C.E., dedicated himself to the promotion of the belief in Y...h as the single God and giver of life, exhorting the believers in Baal and his consort Asherah to give them up for exclusive allegiance to Y...h (Clifford 1993:182-183). Indeed, it was the Jews who introduced this new role of the prophet to reality construction. While the term is sometimes applied to earlier Egyptian ecclesiastics, they were in reality just another form of priests, and their role should not be confused with that of the Hebrews (Erman [1894] 1971:289). Hebrew prophets first appeared as messengers from God to ensure the sincerity of the believers (Parrinder 1971:387), and they sometimes stood in opposition to the priesthood (Erman [1894] 1971:289). Prophets gave voice to an array of experiences, "ranging from the obscure mystical vision of Ezekiel to the clear ethical conviction of Amos," but their primary responsibility was to define the righteous life and, and as God's messengers, to guide the Hebrew people in the fulfillment of their divine mission (Parrinder 1971:387-388; Hill 1993:620). While others conveyed different messages, virtually all prophets seemed to concern themselves with imparting some divine and critical piece of information necessary to make an informed choice regarding ultimate truth. For every individual in the Jewish tradition was responsible for making such choices and living with the consequences (Unterman 1984:31), and the same held true across the religious spectrum after the blossoming of civilization, from Christianity to Confucianism.

In the midst of accelerated social change and conflicting reality constructions, prophets came forth offering insurance against the threat of chaos. A Buddha appears in human history each time we begin to stray from eternal truth (Parrinder 1971:262), and identification of that truth became increasingly problematic with the rise of civilization.

The diverse and complex social organization necessary to civilized society contains the seeds of endless and accelerated social changes that create a state of perpetual conflict and tension between the nomos and lived experience, and these prophets appeared to mediate this tension.

Much has been written regarding the association between messianic movements or eschatological ideas and social upheaval, but seldom is it noted how relatively recent in human history such movements arose. Nor do we typically recognize such movements and ideas as attempts to defend against humankind's fear of death. Yet, they may well reveal an innate drive, which evolved over eons whereby the socially constructed order and lived experience were in relative harmony, to maintain congruence between the world as it is explained and the world as it is experienced. Without the grounding of a tribe and the reinforcement of homogeneous and timeless tribal experience, human beings went beyond nature and day to day experience in search of purpose and meaning, ultimately placing truth in the hands of gods or in transcendent principles objectified and separated from lived experience. All religions and philosophies since the rise of civilization have reacted to this inherent tension. E. O. Wilson (1998b:59, 62) made a similar argument regarding the evolution of morality:

> The complementary instincts of morality and tribalism are easily manipulated. Civilization has made them more so. Beginning about 10,000 years ago, a tick in geological time, when the agricultural revolution started in the Middle East, in China, and in Mesoamerica, populations increased tenfold in density over those of hunter-gatherer societies. Families settled on small plots of land, villages proliferated, and labor was finely divided as a growing minority of the populace specialized as craftsmen, traders, and soldiers. The rising agricultural societies became increasingly hierarchical. As chiefdoms and then states thrived on agricultural surpluses, hereditary rulers and priestly castes took power. The old ethical codes were transformed into coercive regulations, always to the advantage of the ruling classes. About this time the idea of law-giving gods originated. Their commands

lent the ethical codes overpowering authority—once again, no surprise, in the interest of the rulers....[Yet] Paleolithic...tribal instincts are still firmly installed. As part of the genetic foundation of human nature, they cannot be replaced.

The philosophers of ancient Greece were not unlike the prophets who followed them in Judaism. Socrates, for example, is often likened to the prophets of the Old Testament (Solomon & Higgins 1997:35). The Greeks, no less than the Hebrews, needed some guidance through the maze of shifting and competing worldviews. No longer did the human animal have the luxury of exposure to a single, coherent, and unifying story. There now existed complex society with significant stratification and varied life experiences, and lest one wish to face death alone they would have to attach themselves to some body of shared belief regarding life's ultimate purpose. Nevertheless, unlike the prophets of the Old Testament, these Greek philosophers pursued this ultimate truth through reason, and their pursuit has continued unabated for over 2,000 years.

The changing relationship to nature. Whether in their relation to nature, to the gods, or to each other, mankind was forced to contend with the disintegrating effects of civilization. Removed from the natural rhythms of hunting and gathering and confronted with a diversity of people with varied life conditions and experiences, humankind searched for nomoi that could satisfactorily accommodate this distancing from nature and other people. What evolved, at least in the West, was a worldview that separated humankind from nature and placed gods above both, so that, given the proper relationship to the gods, humankind could manipulate forces that in the past he could only hope to influence.

Having achieved some control over nature, civilization needed something more than natural forces to govern social interactions. The hunter/gatherer took moral cues from the natural world of which he or she was merely one player. Because the nomos was drawn from the natural world, one needed only to understand that world and his or her place in it. However, large settled communities cannot be content simply to adapt to the whims of nature; they cannot readily strike their tents and move to better hunting grounds when nature fails to provide. Survival now depended on humankind's ability to not simply understand the forces of nature but also to harness those forces.

We see this shift in nomoi, for example, among the Sumerians, who, like so many societies after them, introduced a god who was responsible for the control of nature and who was subject to human influence. The Sumerians also believed in a physical and moral order according to which this god was supposed to rule, and they referred to this order as *me* (Campbell 1962:178). This god was known as Enlil and "was the beneficent and fatherly progenitor to whom the creation of sun, moon, vegetation, and implements essential to human control of the earth was ascribed (Parrinder 1971:115). In harnessing the rivers and domesticating their food supply, the builders of civilization, in acquiring some control over nature, perpetuated and magnified the need to do so. The more control humankind gained over the forces of nature, the more critical that control became to human survival. The relegation then of this responsibility to a god provided both a satisfying explanation of their newfound power and a means for exercising it. In projecting this need to control nature onto Enlil, for example, who was a god subject to human influence,

the Sumerians objectified the natural world that they now so desperately needed to control.

Like the Sumerians, the Egyptians had mastered the art of agriculture, and their pantheon was rich with gods representing the forces of nature. Chief among these was Osiris, who, among his many attributes, was thought to have introduced agriculture and symbolized the cycle of death and rebirth, as well as the changing seasons and the rise and fall of the Nile (White [1952] 1970:28). In addition, the sun-god doubled as king and was the progenitor of all subsequent kings, or Pharaohs (Erman [1894] 1971:32). There were also countless other gods representing other natural elements such as the water, the sky, the wind, and the moon (Budge [1904] 1969:4), and these deities could be employed to ensure the continued welfare of the people on both sides of the divide between life and death. Egyptian deities were part of a cosmology that celebrated the natural forces and rhythms vital to farming and linked men and gods, who symbolically represented these natural forces, in a concert of life perpetual.

Perhaps no place on earth was more suited to agriculture and its accompanying worldview than Ancient Egypt. "The Egyptian soil...with its ever-constant conditions of life, has always stamped the population of the Nile valley with the same seal" (Erman [1894] 1971:29). Given the daily trip of the sun across cloudless skies and the perpetual, life-giving floods of the Nile, ancient Egyptians must have been keenly sensitive to the concepts of birth, death, and rebirth. Life followed death as surely as the sun reappeared to wash away darkness each dawn, and the river rose to replenish the fields year after year.

Like many Egyptian deities, the Pharaoh's role also reflected the agricultural worldview. "The powers of darkness, though constantly vanquished, attempted ceaselessly to overthrow Egypt by blighting the crops, obstructing the flow of the Nile, causing floods or preventing the sun from rising. It was the Pharaoh, himself a god, whose influence alone could combat these cosmic powers" (White [1952] 1970:9). It is also worth noting, both as an indication of agricultural influences and as a prelude to subsequent cosmologies, that the Pharaoh was perceived to be both harsh and gentle (13). People who depended on agriculture were very sensitive to the vicissitudes of the weather, and it is understandable that their gods would possess this dualistic nature. Perhaps not coincidentally, this same characteristic was applied to the later God of the Hebrews.

The evolution of monotheism carried the human animal even further from its primitive roots, distancing humankind from the forces of nature by substituting for the varied and complex natural order not a pantheon but a single and rather uncompromising deity. In relegating different gods to different realms, polytheism can sustain a worldview that incorporates some of the richness and nuance of nature, but monotheism seems less equipped to incorporate this complexity. As per Festinger (1983:131) regarding the effects of monotheism in the Hebrew tradition (1983:131),

> It is not surprising, however, that if such an idea took hold, it would be accompanied by foolproof, ironclad guarantees and assurances. This one-and -only god had to have a special relationship to these people, and the means of maintaining this relationship had to be detailed. This all-powerful god promised the uprooted people land of their own and, even more importantly, guaranteed them military victory again and again. And the means of propitiating this god were spelled out in detail— it covered almost every aspect of daily existence. This god was also capable of, and ready to use, terrible retribution if his rules and regulations were violated.

When Moses came down from the mountain with God's laws set in stone, the pagan vision of seeing order, harmony, and justice in the nature of things was changed forever. The laws came down from on high, from a distance, emanating from a source from which humankind could be alienated. "Unlike the pagan deities, Y...h was not in any of the forces of nature but in a realm apart" (Armstrong 1993:27). Alienation from nature was not an experience to which the human animal was accustomed; the total of his evolutionary development had demanded precisely the opposite, and the effects of this alienation from the natural world may still be felt.

The fact that the concept of redemption appeared only after humankind began to feel the effects of its separation from nature suggests a link between the two. One might expect that the distancing from nature experienced after the shift to agriculture could trigger a sense of loss in the collective memory of a species spanning millions of years and that humankind would seek to rationalize this loss. Indeed, a common theme of the emergent world religions was the return to some previous utopian state, creating, as Berger (1967:68-69) argued, a nomos situated outside the present. The meaningful order was attributed to some other time, thus avoiding the dissonance between present life experiences and the assumed order of the cosmos. That is, things may seem out of kilter now, but they have not always been so, and the rightful order will return in some future time and place. The theodicy of redemption often involves the linking of some primal paradise with a future return to that paradise, giving comfort to people made anxious by a radical change in human social organization.

The Christian emphasis on individual redemption, while offering some solace against the threat of chaos, may also have had a disintegrating effect on both the individual and society. Where the individual is integrated into a community, the natural surroundings, and the cosmic order, redemption, whether as a return to some past state of perfection or future utopia, is not an issue. There is no sense of a fall from grace and no need for rectification. The meaningful order makes itself evident at every turn: every breeze, every tree, every birth, and every death gives credence to the nomos. However, when the realization of that order is set in the future rather than the present and responsibility for that realization is placed upon the individual, the human animal is set apart not only from the rest of nature but also, at least potentially, from the corporate body. The promise to the individual of future glory allowed for an interpretation of the defense against chaos (or Hades) as an entirely individual phenomenon.

Of course, many Christians would argue like Thomas Merton (1968:82-83) that the fall from grace is a mythical account of humankind's separation from self and God through the creation of ego and that the task of the Christian then is to resist this separation. Indeed, one definition of sin is separation from the powers of the gods and the setting up of oneself as *causa sui*. Interestingly, missionaries found this idea difficult to translate to primitives. These cultures had no word for sin because "they had little experience of isolation or separateness from the group or the ancestral pool of souls" (Becker 1975:88). Be that as it may, civilized humankind has had ample experience with separation, which is a fact that is reflected in the nomoi created during this period, and at least one interpreta-

tion of salvation is that it allowed for the further isolation of the human animal in the cosmos.

From Judaism, Christianity inherited the belief in the one true God who has a plan for humanity with a beginning and end and a set of instructions for avoiding psychic annihilation. Christianity offered a hope of salvation and an end time in which the Lord would return to reign over all, and, while the corporate body was an important factor in the formula for salvation, it was not the most important. Identification with the corporate body of Christians was not a birthright but required a conscious choice by the individual. "The bond with Jesus had precedence over the bond of national unity" (Walls 1984:59). Through willing acceptance of the Christian story and adherence to its tenets, one could overcome death and live forever. As previously noted, one of Christianity's basic tenets is the love of one's neighbor. "'He that loveth not abideth in death' (John 3:4)" (Parrinder 1971:421). What better way to transcend the divisions between people of diverse back-grounds, cultures, experiences, etcetera than to instruct them that the way to confront the dread of insignificance is to love one another, regardless of tribal identity? Given the exigencies of life in a band or tribe where collective survival was built on biology, interde-pendence, and cooperation, our primitive ancestors needed no such admonitions.

The Judeo-Christian-Muslim story of return to an original state of bliss may well reflect a primitive atavism, but, if so, it seems certainly limited in its effectiveness by the reality of changed social conditions. For example, "Christianity failed to establish the universal democratic equality that it had promised historically–the reinstitution of the sacred primitive community" (Becker 1975:70). Societies as complex and diverse as the

first great civilizations, relative to those of the primitives, did not readily comport with nomoi calling for a return to primitive simplicity. One result was an ongoing tension between the two that ultimately resulted in the evolution of a new nomos.

Transition through the Middle Ages. For a thousand years after the institutionalization of the monotheistic narrative, philosophers and theologians tried to shore up their particular version of this story against increasing diversity and heightened competition for the minds of their respective audiences. No new grand narratives appeared but simply variations on a theme, and most of these variants sprang from experiences of social upheaval. That is, they appeared when lived experience could not be satisfactorily reconciled with the dominant narrative.

One approach common to early Jewish, Christian, and Muslim writers alike was to reconcile their new stories with the older philosophies of classical Greece, which still held some power over the hearts and minds of the populace. Evidently, these Greek philosophies continued to offer some degree of power over mortality and some assurance against chaos and, therefore, could not simply be discarded wholesale. They somehow had to be reconciled with the new stories. Still, from early in the millennium God was firmly in place as the omnipotent and omniscient creator of all, and almost every major thinker from Augustine in the fifth century to Calvin in the sixteenth century worked with the basic nomos of a God-centered, principled universe as its backdrop. While there was much debate about the mind of God, there was no serious suggestion that something other than God's mind might be grist for the mill. Monotheism was the tent under which all dwelt,

and each writer dedicated himself or herself to discerning the nature, purpose, and material of the tent.

Augustine, for example, wrote that a central concern of religion is the relationship between God and the human soul, thus shifting emphasis for the first time in Western philosophy to subjective experience and exploration of one's inner life (Solomon & Higgins 1997:56-57). This shift in focus was probably both a cause and consequence of growing individualism, which is an individualism that, as earlier pointed out, could be absorbed into communalism through the vehicle of neighborly love. Nevertheless, Augustine's subjective explorations also employed reason, and reason was to become a foundation stone and a central theodicy of the coming nomos. Indeed, much of *The City of God* (Augustine [1467] 1972) is a thoughtfully reasoned argument as to how an individual can establish a "right" relationship with the Almighty.

This age of shifting religious narratives is in large measure marked by a contest between reason and faith. "If there was a single dispute that captured the core of philosophy between the first and second millennia, it was the debate over faith and reason and their role in religion" (Solomon & Higgins 1997:61). Moslem philosophers such as Avicenna and Averroes and Jewish writers such as Maimonedes emphasized the compatibility between faith and reason, and among Christians St. Anselm founded scholasticism in which he tried to wed Aristotelian logic and Christian faith (Adams 1995:37-38). This movement remained an important force in Christian thought for at least 300 years and included such luminaries as Peter Abelard, St. Thomas Aquinas, and John Duns Scotus (Angeles 1981:250). Notwithstanding the efforts of the Scholastics and many others who

attempted to reconcile faith and reason, the latter gradually took on a life apart and eventually emerged as one of the pillars of the modern worldview.

The next significant alteration on the Judeo-Christian nomos came with the Renaissance, which was centered in northern Italy in the late fifteenth century. Europe had experienced a plague (the Black Death) and the Hundred Years War, and Italy was in a state of chaos and confusion. The Christian story as told by the Catholic Church evidently no longer rang true for growing numbers of Westerners, as they searched for some view of reality that would maintain those still plausible elements of the old nomos and incorporate their new experience of the changing world. One important new idea growing out of this tension came to be known as humanism—a renewed belief in the dignity of the individual (Solomon & Higgins 1997:66). Humanism was a reaction to the anticorporeal philosophies of the Middle Ages and marked a renewed interest in humanity and the human world. "With its passion for observation and practical application, humanism is the final stone in the intellectual foundation of Western science...humanism became the impetus for the explosion of European science and technology which, after 1600, shaped the modern world" (Hurff 1999:49). Nevertheless, although it may have prepared the foundation for the rise of science, early humanism was born and nourished within the Judeo-Christian tradition and was far from Godless (Solomon & Higgins 1997:66). While new elements were being introduced, the basic Judeo-Christian-Muslim defense against death continued to hold, and "Humanists were forced to settle the perennial questions that preceded religious belief: What is life for? What is man's duty and destiny? What is the significance of death?" (Barzun 2000:64).

In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, serious criticisms of the church

narrative began to appear from within the ranks of the church itself and, of course, culmi-

nated in major challenges following Luther's public airing of grievances on October 31,

1517. Like others within the church, Luther was unhappy with some of its practices,

particularly as related to salvation, and was uncomfortable with the Scholastic's emphasis

on reason. Luther maintained that humankind is sinful by nature, so all human faculties are

corrupted and reason cannot possibly lead us to the truth. He focused instead on faith and

argued that salvation comes by faith and not through reason or even good works, if

unaccompanied by the proper faith (Solomon & Higgins 1997:68-69). Regardless of his

theology, Luther's challenge to Church authority (that happened to coincide with the

invention of movable type) set in motion what would come to be known as the Protestant

Reformation, changing the way the Western world would understand itself and its place in

the universe and ushering in the modern era (3-4). After a millennium as the dominant

Western narrative defense against mortality, Judeo-Christian (and by extension, Muslim)

theism was set to be challenged by a revolutionary new nomos, one that would eventually

seek to displace God and put humankind in control of its own fate.

Modern Society

Characteristics. There are of course variations on the definition of modernity but

there seems to be general agreement as to the central characteristics: the application of

rational human ingenuity to nature, popular democratic participation, secularization,

freedom from superstition and myth, technological advance, industrialization, urbaniza-

tion, and freedom from disease and want (Griswold 1994:109). To Griswold's list we can add capitalism and individualism. Modernity is marked by a break with agrarian forms of social organization and even further distancing from the prototype of the primitive tribal community, and it began to take form in Western Europe after a thousand years of Christian dominance.

Religion and philosophy, the dominant narratives of civilization, of course today retain much of their original power over the individual and the collective imaginations, but their legitimacy began to face a serious challenge from nascent science in the late Middle Ages (and somewhat earlier in the Near East). Society had reached a scale or a level of complexity, diversity, and rate of change that would simply not support any single religious/mythic understanding of human fortunes. Whereas primitive society changed little in basic structure for eons and agrarian society forced humans into new forms of social organization over the course of millennia, society in the late Middle Ages was characterized by marked and accelerating change in every facet of existence, resulting in a society more complex, varied, and diverse than anything previously known by the human animal.

Increasing concentrations of populations provided the impetus for the creation of new nomoi and new ways of ordering the universe and humankind's place in it. Dramatic changes had taken place in Europe between the tenth and sixteenth centuries. Among these were emerging markets, the rise of a merchant class, improved agricultural techniques, increased urbanization, and a new emphasis on status (Roberts 1993:408-416). Growing urbanization since the twelfth century had shifted centers of learning from monasteries to urban universities, allowing for more openness and scientific comparisons

of the ideas of Aristotle and Plato and setting them on a course toward greater conflict with the Church (Crosby 1997:58-59; Hurff 1999:19). The West was thus forced to rethink its worldview and to construct a new explanation of reality. "Its traditional ways of perceiving and explaining were failing in their primary function, which was, in Bouwsma's words, 'to impose a meaning on...experience that can give to life a measure of reliability and thus reduce, even if it cannot altogether abolish, life's ultimate and terrifying uncertainties'" (Crosby 1997:58). The new nomos that ultimately emerged was that of a mechanical universe, and the dominant theodicy was science. However, this new science-based approach to understanding the universe and defending against death emerged triumphant only after much struggling over the old stories as "one religious faction battled another over some small point of theology (and, often, over some significant piece of land or political advantage)" (Solomon & Higgins 1997:79). This effort to create a new meaningful order was an arduous one and involved negotiation among a diverse collection of participants over an extended period of time. (Indeed, postmodernity notwithstanding, there exists ample evidence that the contest continues to rage.)

The increasing concentration of populations in urban centers created societies that were ever more diverse and heterogeneous in terms of culture and class and, perhaps even more importantly, lived-experience. Humans were increasingly in contact with people unlike themselves in any number of ways: ethnicity, social class, occupation, education, leisure, religion, etcetera. Modernity also followed a period of global exploration in which Western Europeans came in contact with people of other cultures and beliefs, and by the

middle of the nineteenth century the average Westerner was living in a social world that was structurally very different from anything experienced by his or her ancestors.

Capitalism emerged as the dominant model in economics as did democracy in politics, each of which served to supplant both traditional social relations as well as narratives. Industrialization became the new basis for subsistence in these large-scale societies, which also experienced a more complex division of labor and class system, as well as a multiplication of roles, statuses, groups, and institutions. The kinds of nomoi that humankind had experimented with since the rise of civilization, particularly that of the church in Western Europe, were simply no longer entirely plausible for growing numbers of people and thus did little to allay human fears of disorder and meaninglessness. We will return to this discussion later, but suffice to say that, given the rapid and dramatic social changes taking place in this period, the drive to reconstruct a meaningful explanation of the human experience was, in hindsight, inevitable.

Beginning with the Renaissance, European society started to experience a shift in what Crosby (1997:xi) referred to as "habits of thought." The old ideas began to lose their plausibility. All religions require a community for their continued plausibility (Berger 1967:46), and, in the face of growing urbanization, stratification, and diversity, communities became increasingly difficult to sustain. The minimal definition for a community is simply a group of people who share a common nomos, which offers a common defense against death. Each new generation must be socialized in the belief that the nomos is real, and this process began to break down in Western Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. As Berger (46) noted, "When this plausibility structure loses its intactness or

continuity, the Christian world begins to totter and its reality ceases to impose itself as self-evident truth." The Middle Ages were, as Sorokin (1941:20) observed, a period of transition in which ideational culture became idealistic, that is, partly sensory and partly supersensory. Ultimately, sensate culture (i.e., sensory, empirical, secular, and this-worldly) emerged dominant in the sixteenth century and seemed to at least partially address the weaknesses inherent in religion. In other words, a new nomos emerged out of the collective efforts of countless innovators that seemed to have the power to transcend all of this new diversity, comprehend all of the mind-numbing change, and still comport with lived experience.

A new nomos emerges. By the eighteenth century a new nomos was in place, which was one that posited a mechanical universe ruled by laws rather than abstract principles. As with the previous transitions, the old nomoi did not completely vanish, and theism continued, albeit in a somewhat altered form, as an important explanation of life's meaning. As the modern period began there was an attempt at collaboration between science (the new theodicy giving mankind access to the mechanical universe) and religion: science was to explain material reality and religion was to explain the rest, including death. The modern period culminated, however, in science taking over the collaboration and ultimately proposing, in its most audacious variant, to overcome death.

The transition to the modern nomos was a gradual one, with the first hints of a new order appearing as early as the eleventh and twelfth centuries. In hindsight we can see that the prevailing beliefs about mankind's purpose and place in the universe no longer

harmonized with the experiences and observations of increasing numbers of people. The Medieval Christian narrative began to waiver, and its truths could no longer be taken as self-evident (Berger 1967:46). As previously discussed, philosophers and theologians began to rethink the dominant narrative, the plausiblity of which was increasingly challenged by the accelerating pace of social change, experience, and the growing understanding of the material world. Indeed, the history of Medieval Christianity is a steady series of attempts to reaffirm the sacred order of the cosmos in the face of changing social reality and life experiences. For example, every theologian who tried to demonstrate that suffering did not negate the conception of a loving and all-powerful God was engaged in the search for a workable theodicy, in reconciling experience and belief (53). "When an entire society serves as the plausibility structure for a religiously legitimated world, all the important social processes within it serve to confirm and reconfirm the reality of this world" (48). However, in the Middle Ages, because of the increasing pace of social change and growing diversity, the plausibility structure was no longer served by the entire society, and new structures arose that were at times in competition with one another.

At the end of the Middle Ages Europe was becoming increasingly secular, urban, and dominated by market economics, which were conditions quite different from those existing a thousand years earlier when Christianity first emerged as the dominant nomos. As the disconnect grew between this grand narrative and social experience, the plausibility of the Medieval religious nomoi continued to suffer. By the eighteenth century many people were dissatisfied with the way civilization had turned out and felt that if they could determine what went wrong they could set it right (Becker 1975:38). The effectiveness of

a nomos in defending the individual against chaos is linked directly to what Berger (1967:15) called subjective/objective symmetry. The human animal seeks consistency between subjective experience and the socially defined objective reality. Given increasing urbanization and diversification of human experience, as well as the growing significance of subjective understanding, this symmetry became increasingly difficult to maintain in seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe. The grand religious narratives could not be reconciled with the lived experiences of growing numbers of people, and adjustments were made. With more and more people beginning to question the prevailing nomos, doubt became the seed of a new theodicy. The path to meaning would soon require the questioning of all previously held beliefs.

A mechanical universe. The new nomos envisioned an orderly and predictable universe divinely ordained but accessible to human sense experience; the universe was like a great watch, and God was the Watchmaker. The universe was conceived as having been made by God according to discernible rules, and humankind had the capacity to understand those rules. Indeed, if one was to have any defense against chaos in light of this new vision of the Almighty, he or she was obliged to understand these rules. This metaphor, introduced by Nicole Oresme in the fourteenth century, "guided the thoughts of men who gave us classical physics and, one could argue, was equally important for the creators of classical economics and Marxism" (Crosby 1997:83-84).

Modern science represented a secular attempt at cosmization by promising a temporal and material link between the individual, society, and the cosmos. Every society

is engaged in the perpetual construction of a meaningful world, but the ultimate grounding

of the nomos in the socially constructed cosmos need not necessarily be sacred, and, of

those modern secular attempts at cosmization, modern science is the most important

(Berger 1967:27). Science, no less than religion, is uncomfortable with chaos, meaning-

lessness, and the abyss and seeks to shine light on the darkness just as did earlier nomoi.

An "ad hoc theodicy is operative whenever men identify with a particular collectivity and

its nomos, on whatever level of theoretical sophistication. The primitive prototype thus

continues historically in a variety of more or less complex modifications" (63). Or as per

Lifton (1979:21-22),

> The Greek idea of the atom, for instance, expressed a powerful impulse to "keep
> back the void," an impulse by no means absent today in physicists' use of ever
> more extensive technology to demonstrate ever more minuscule particles, even as
> their very physicality comes into doubt....The great historical transition from relig-
> ion to science refers to a major shift in the imagery through which large numbers
> of people in general (not just scientists or theologians) experience the continuity of
> human existence....Everyone in this age participates in a sense of immortality de-
> rived from the interlocking human projects we call science and technology.

Science, made up of reason, empiricism, and doubt, was an almost perfect theodicy

for reconciling the increasingly diverse experiences of the human species (especially those

congregating in cities) with the cosmic order. "The successes of science were so impres-

sive, its superiority over traditional philosophy and religion so clearly proven in the minds

of many people, that science became the new metaphysical realism: the source of ultimate

and objective truth" (Anderson 1990:72). The theodicy of science completely altered and

in many ways overshadowed the various and competing religious and philosophical nomoi

of the previous 4,000 years. Shapin (1996:162) captured the essence of this new over-

powering narrative in the following:

The very idea of the modern natural sciences is bound up with an appreciation that they are objective rather than subjective accounts. They represent *what is* in the natural world, not *what ought to be*, while the possibility of such a radical distinction between scientific "is-knowledge" and moral "ought knowledge" itself depends on separating the objects of natural knowledge from the objects of moral discourse. The objective character of the natural sciences is supposed to be further secured by a method that disciplines practitioners to set aside their passions and interests in the making of scientific knowledge. Science, in this account, fails to report objectively on the world–it fails to *be* science–if it allows consideration of value, morality, or politics to intrude into the processes of making and validating knowledge. When science is being done, society is kept at bay. The broad form of this understanding of science was developed in the seventeenth century, and that is one major reason canonical accounts have identified the Scientific Revolution as the epoch that made the world modern.

This new scientific approach differed markedly from the certainty promised by the Judeo-Christian-Moslem story. These premodern narratives not only offered the key to unlock the door to life's meaning but also showcased what was on the other side, or the purpose of life's journey. Whether that purpose was pursuit of a literal afterlife as depicted by Moslems and Christians or an intricate and detailed accounting of God's expectations for the perpetuation of His people, as with the Jews, there was little room for doubt. These stories did not invite exploration; they demanded commitment. The modern narrative, on the other hand, rejected both these traditional religious narratives and those of classical Greece because they did not stand up to doubt. By definition, the modern narrative, because it centers on doubt, cannot offer certainty regarding life's meaning and purpose. Instead it offers the *hope* that, given the proper discipline and method, we will one day eliminate all doubt and find the answer to life's riddle. It offers a key that will some day unlock the door but makes no claims about what awaits us on the other side.

This new view of a mechanical universe whose laws are accessible proved remarkably popular. "The warm enthusiasm of Francis Bacon had inspired all Europe

(except Rousseau) with unquestioning confidence in the power of science and logic to solve at last all problems and illustrate the 'infinite perfectibility' of man" (Durant 1961:254). Indeed, medical science would allow us "to banish death, and so deny it a place in our consciousness" (Becker 1975:17). Bacon had given humankind a defense against mortality that required him to deny neither his experience nor his God. In the Baconian view God had given humankind both a puzzle and the good sense to figure it out. It is the latter part that provides modern humankind its defense against chaos. The comfort and immortality power of such a view reside in the belief that the riddle can ultimately be solved and that humankind can know the true order of the universe, and it is only in the last 50 years that this view has been seriously challenged.

The verification of truth through the theodicy of science differed greatly from the verification of truth through the theodicy of religion. Since the advent of theism and philosophy, the legitimacy of a worldview depended largely upon its acceptance by large numbers of people across generations and, hence, the close relationship between religion and politics throughout the period. However, with the coming of the modern age, truth came to depend, at least ostensibly, on objectivity and observation. In the modern age it became necessary to reconcile one's claim to truth with the growing body of scientifically verified knowledge regarding the physical world. One's narrative may not necessarily have been derived from empirical scientific observation, but legitimacy now required that all narratives at least address this newfound method and the knowledge it generated. Truth was objectified.

Efforts at tent enlargement. The modern era is marked by a continuous string of attempts to create plausible nomoi and theodicies in the face of increasingly complex and internally diverse societies. Knowledge about the material world was rapidly changing, and subjective experience was increasingly varied, making the fit between that experience and objective reality ever more problematic. The old Greek and Hebrew models were disharmonious, and the West "had a chronic need for explainers, adjustors, and resynthesizers" (Crosby 1997:56). In the drive to incorporate all of this newfound variety in a single plausible explanation, the sacred canopy was stretched precariously thin. The following review covers very briefly some of the most important ideas that went into the construction of what ultimately came to represent the modern nomos.

As previously mentioned, one of the earliest modern efforts to expand the canopy occurred in the eleventh century, when St. Anselm proposed a means for integrating Aristotelian logic and Christian theology and in doing so introduced what came to be known as scholasticism (Adams 1995:37-38). Aristotelian ideas themselves represented an earlier effort to expand the canopy of an increasingly urban and cosmopolitan Greece; therefore, it was natural that Westerners would be drawn to such thoughts in reconciling their own objective and subjective experiences. Furthermore, Greek thought obviously enjoyed a legitimacy that, once discovered, could not be ignored by Christian thinkers. These two legitimate (though not necessarily plausible) nomoi begged to be reconciled. Anselm responded and was followed by Averroes, Maimonides, Aquinas, and others, and "scholasticism remained the dominant European philosophy until the fifteenth century,

when it gave way, in turn, to Renaissance humanism, rationalism, and empiricism"

(Haldane 1995:802).

Randall Collins (1998:790-791) proposed a slightly different but not inconsistent

view of the rise of scholasticism, as well as the general evolution of philosophical ideas, in

his argument that, as societies become more diverse, the level of abstraction/reflexivity

increases. In support of this argument he called on Durkheim's thoughts regarding the

division of labor.

> As societies grow larger, more stratified, organizationally and economically differ-
> entiated, the spiritual entities of religion become less localized, expanding in their
> scope, and eventually leaving the concrete worldly level entirely for a transcendent
> realm....As Durkheim held, abstraction develops so as to maintain unification
> across diverseness. As more members are included in the intellectual network, its
> collective consciousness is strained to encompass their distinctiveness....Debates at
> one level of abstraction are resolved by moving to a higher level of abstraction
> from which they can be judged and reinterpreted.

Moving to a higher level of abstraction is the philosophical equivalent of expanding the

sacred canopy to cover a more diverse set of experiences. The principle distinction be-

tween philosophy and traditional religions is in their definition of the sacred.

Like scholasticism, humanism emerged as a response to the growing disharmony

between the subjective experience of changing urban lifestyles and the objective experi-

ence of the prevailing Judeo-Christian narrative. Thus, Petrarch and other early Renais-

sance humanists redirected attention away from God and His earthly representatives and

toward mankind and his social world. They were concerned with power, material success,

and social well-being, self-development, action, and the employment of reason to under-

stand and improve human conditions (Barzun 2000:44).

> With its passion for observation and practical application, humanism is the final
> stone in the intellectual foundation of Western science. Driving men to excel, to

fulfill their human potential in a pragmatic way, humanism became the impetus for the explosion of European science and technology which, after 1600, shaped the modern world. (Hurff 1999:49)

Humanism's embrace of all of humanity in the corporate body and its concern with social well-being inspired More's *Utopia*, in which he imagined the creation of an ideal society. The net was cast to include not all of creation (as in primitive stories) but all of humanity, and humankind became the measure of all things. However, it is important to remember that this new emphasis on the dignity and centrality of humanity was born and nourished within the Judeo-Christian tradition and was not entirely secular or Godless. The plague and the Hundred Years War had destroyed a large segment of the population of Europe, and "Renaissance Humanism can be seen as a recoil from those awful years" (Solomon & Higgins 1997:66-67). Again we see a new narrative appearing with changing social conditions and uncertainty about the power of the old story to defend against annihilation. "As knowledge grew, fear decreased; men thought less of worshipping the unknown and more of overcoming it" (Durant 1961:105).

Of course, even among those who were not content with the Judeo-Christian story as put forth by the church, not all were enthusiastic about the supremacy of reason or the centrality of humankind. Martin Luther, for one, rejected humanism and emphasized humankind's sinful nature, arguing that, as a result of this nature, even reason is corrupt. Therefore, both the old narrative and the new were misguided; the true and only defense against meaninglessness and chaos was faith in God's mercy, and that faith flowed from the will of the individual. "Christianity was now to be located in the inner life of the spirit, not in the institution of the church or a system of theology (Solomon & Higgins 1997:68).

In offering the individual a path to salvation outside of the institutional church, Luther gave added legitimacy to the practice of individual reality construction. Those who could not accept the construction of meaning as put forth by the institutional church could still be brought under the Christian tent. Therefore, while Luther was clearly promoting Christianity as the nomos, he furthered the cause of individualism and facilitated the ongoing disagreement as to the correct interpretation of the Christian narrative.

Bacon's promotion of scientific method and empiricism provided new impetus for challenging the dominant religious narrative of the Catholic Church, although it was apparently not his intent to challenge belief in the existence of God and His divine order. Indeed, he maintained that philosophy practiced seriously would bring one back to religion and was passionate in his search for unity (Durant 1961:114, 141). Bacon proclaimed that knowledge is power and declared humankind's dominion over nature as promised in Genesis (Solomon & Higgins 1997:70), thus providing further justification for an alternative to passive acceptance of religious doctrine. Bacon's ideas provided the foundation for a socially broad if not very deep nomos: anyone open to the pursuit of knowledge (rather than only those willing to accept church dogma) was automatically brought under the tent and welcomed into the pursuit of the true empirically verifiable meaningful order.

Knowledge of the natural world would give humankind command of that world and thus minimize fears of disorder. Bacon held that most philosophies merely heightened the fear of death by building defenses against it and offered instead the following prescription: "To produce works, one must have knowledge. Nature cannot be commanded except by being obeyed. Let us learn the laws of nature and we shall be her masters, as we are

now, in ignorance, her thralls; science is the road to utopia" (Durant 1961:113, 120). Prior

to the advent of science,

> Reality was seen as, first and foremost, a resistance to human purposeful activity.
> The aim of science was to find out how that resistance could be broken. The result-
> ing conquest of nature would mean the emancipation of humanity from natural
> constraints; the enhancement, so to speak, of our collective freedom. (Bauman
> 1990:218)

Knowledge was, then, to serve as both a unifying force and a defense against chaos. The

conquest of nature would secure humankind against life's unpredictability and disorder.

Thomas Hobbes took Bacon's reason and applied it to social and political organi-

zation and in so doing separated the emerging narrative even further from the worldview

of traditional religion. "In Hobbes the rationalism of Bacon had become an uncompromis-

ing atheism and materialism" (Durant 1961:255). From Spinoza to Diderot the old faiths

had been destroyed and atheism had become fashionable (255). To Hobbes, humankind in

a natural state is engaged in endless and ruthless competition and lives in perpetual fear of

death. Therefore, to protect humankind from its inherent nature and liberate it from this

state of fear and misery, there must exist an absolute political sovereignty (Nisbet

1982:26-28). That is, Hobbes' response to the drive for some plausible nomos in the face

of changing circumstances was political; society would simply impose one.

Politically, socially, and culturally Europe was in a state of permanent crisis from

the late Middle Ages through the end of the seventeenth century (Shapin 1996:123). Early

in that century Descartes, like Montaigne, was deeply disturbed by the religious turmoil in

Europe, but, whereas Montaigne recommended tolerance as a way out of conflict, Des-

cartes turned to reason. To him reason was a welcome alternative to the bloody religious

disputes tearing nations apart (Solomon & Higgins 1997:73). While it may not have been perceived in such terms, the dominant narrative was steadily losing credibility as a hedge against chaos, and differing factions took up their own self-serving versions to satisfy both social and political needs. A nomos provides meaning as long as order is sustained, but, when that order breaks down, the nomos is naturally questioned. Descartes then, like others before and after, responded to the discomfort of uncertainty and made the search for certainty the cornerstone of his philosophy. Also, because he was among the first to challenge traditional social structures he is often "regarded as the first modern philosopher" (Grafton 1996:40).

Descartes, however, was not prepared to completely discard the old narrative and devised a way to pursue his philosophy without directly challenging religious tradition (although church leaders were apparently not convinced). He envisioned a mind/body split by arguing that it was possible to imagine he had no body but impossible to imagine that he, the one imagining, did not exist. Therefore, he divided human beings into the material and mortal body and the immaterial and immortal soul (Grafton 1996:43). The material world, then, was subject to skepticism and doubt, while the spiritual domain was left to the church, further paving the way for the emerging narrative of empirical science but providing little comfort to those not consoled by the immortality power of an increasingly fractious religious tradition. Doubt is a dubious foundation on which to raise a sacred canopy.

Spinoza then tried to put back together what Descartes had torn apart by proposing that mind and body are part of a single substance. He lived much of his life in exile and

searched for a solution to the loneliness and suffering of life in a sometimes conflicted

world. Spinoza's response to that conflict was to propose a monistic or pantheistic

worldview. There is but one substance with infinite attributes, and that substance is God;

God and the universe are one (Sprigge 1995:845-848; Solomon & Higgins 1997:76). That

is, Spinoza sought an answer to social and religious conflict and the questions regarding

one's immortality that were raised by such conflicts, through belief in a single unifying

power.

> In Spinoza's vision, there is no ultimate distinction between different individuals. We are all part of the same single substance, which is also God. This means that our sense of isolation from and opposition to one another is an illusion, and it also means that our sense of distance from God is mistaken. This edifying vision would become a powerful picture by the turn of the nineteenth century, when Christian philosophers would also try to overcome what they called "alienation" between people and peoples and the alienating concept of a transcendent God, a God "beyond" us....Furthermore, since the one substance has always existed and will always exist, our own immortality is assured. (Solomon & Higgins 1997:77)

The debate between faith and reason persisted in the West into the eighteenth

century, as did continuing social and political tensions. Of course faith did not disappear,

but after the eighteenth century it no longer served as the dominant theodicy of the

Western cultural narrative. From this point in history, reason and empirical observation

sometimes competed and other times cooperated in filling to take its place (Solomon &

Higgins 1997:80). Reason, a concept inherited from the Greeks, became both a theodicy

for a new nomos and a bridge to the previous religious views. "It was universally held that

man, at his best, was a reasonable creature; the world that he sought to understand was

also reasonable, the creation of a reasonable Creator" (Van Doren 1991:217). God was

not yet dropped from the story, but He was given a new less active role.

Having strayed from the solid ground of absolute faith, philosophers continued to search for some new narrative foundation with the power to give life meaning. While still clinging to faith, Locke adopted reason as a vehicle for understanding the world but added sensory experience to the equation (Durant 1961:256). Vico established the foundation for nineteenth century Romanticism with his view that humankind alters its own nature and that truth is relative to culture and linguistic context (Lilla 1993:32-39). Voltaire, reacting to the social unrest of the eighteenth century and the seeming irrelevance of Christianity to the new social conditions, provided the outline of a new narrative. He maintained that morality should be based on the changing needs of society and not on theology, revelation, or dogma. The earth will come into its own only when heaven is destroyed. Industry will ensure peace, and knowledge will form the basis of a new and natural morality, he argued (Durant 1961:231). As a Deist, Voltaire still clung to a basic tenet of the religious narrative, but Hume had no such inclinations. He argued that science should restrict itself to mathematics since only mathematical statements are tautological and verifiable. Consequently, inquiry into the nature of existence could no longer support religion (258).

Reacting to the bloodless character of Enlightenment science, Rousseau believed humankind to have existed at one point in a state of natural bliss, that is, as a noble savage (Wilson 1998a:54). He ushered in a Romanticism that lasted until the mid-nineteenth century and carried with it a revival of religious beliefs. For example, in *Emile* he proposed that, while reason may argue against belief in God and immortality, feeling did not, and therefore we should not trust reason over instinct (Durant 1961:260).

While rationalism and empiricism appealed to the sensibilities of many for whom the Judeo-Christian narrative had diminished relevance, Rousseau's ideas suggested that it failed to fully address some innate human needs. Empiricism can provide descriptions but has difficulty with explanations; it can answer how questions but not why. It can tell us how the planets are held in their orbits but not why they (and hence we) exist in the first place. Hence, empiricism lacks one of the most important components of a nomos and continues to face challenges from more traditional worldviews.

Kant entered the debate over the construction of the new social reality in the middle of the eighteenth century in a seeming effort to salvage something of the old narrative while reconciling the apparent conflict between reason and instinct. He was incensed by Hume's attacks on reason and religion and inspired by Rousseau's arguments for instinct over reason while vowing to save religion from reason and science from skepticism (Kant 1929:127; Durant 1961:259). He maintained that the laws of logic and the laws of nature are one, so that logic and metaphysics merge, science is absolute, and truth is everlasting. Because knowledge and truth exist *a priori*, reason tells us that moral behavior must converge with happiness. "This leads us 'to postulate' the existence of God, the immortality of the human soul, and an afterlife. Reason, but not as knowledge, points us in the direction of religious faith" (Solomon & Higgins 1997:93). However, because space, time, and cause do not exist independent of perception, such things as the existence of an immortal soul or religion cannot be proved by reason (Durant 1961:273-275). Morality must provide its own justification. "Thus, although Kant himself was quite religious, his moral theory was compatible with a secular or atheistic perspective"

(Solomon & Higgins 1997:93). While it certainly does not seem to have been his intent, Kant's argument moved humankind one step further from the God of the Middle Ages and one step closer to secularism and modernity. Indeed, Heine observed that Kant killed God (Durant 1961:275). Be that as it may, Kant's solution to the problem of constructing a tent large enough to accommodate all of eighteenth century Western experience was the concept of *a priori* truth and knowledge.

Kant tried to identify a moral order based on universal reason (Solomon & Higgins 1997:90-91). He posited the existence of maxims and categorical imperatives, underlying principles, and unconditional duties that we rationally want to apply to everyone (Warburton 1999:44-45). Each of us knows intuitively how we must behave toward others if we wish society to function, and it is our duty to follow that intuition. In effect, he created a practical argument for the imposition of the "golden rule." Kant believed we know in our hearts the moral thing to do, and this intuition, rather than dogma or ceremony, is the source of the kind of community that constitutes the real church, or the kind of church promoted by Christ (Durant 1961:279-280).

This conception of community driven by the necessities of cooperation seems to fit very closely to that of the tribe. Using both reason and intuition, which Kant believes to be inherent, he arrives at the kind of social organization that gives meaning to humankind's existence. Religion built on creed can divide humankind, but religion built on this common morality unites. In a world splintered by diverse peoples and experiences, Kant proposed a narrative to satisfy a human need for unity and kinship. For him, the many religions and philosophies flying about were but variations on one universal truth (291).

Hegel, likewise, continued the search for universal truth. "[His] philosophy was a self-conscious attempt to transcend the various distinctions and warring camps that had defined human thought for the past two-and-a-half millennia" (Solomon & Higgins 1997:95). Secularism and monotheism, science and spirit, and reason and passion would all be subsumed under some grand unifying philosophy. Hegel's argument for the existence of a universal spirit represents yet another attempt to overcome growing diversity of culture, class, and experience and create a common identity for all of humanity, for a narrative without universal application is limited in its power against death; that is, there can be no Achilles heel.

After over 500 years in gestation, the nineteenth century finally saw the birth of the truly modern narrative, a narrative whose essential elements are contained in the works of Auguste Comte. Comte, as succinctly as anyone, captured the passing of the torch from religion, specifically theism, to science. He replaced the priest with the scientist and created a kind of nontheistic religion (Ruse 1995:145).

> Comte's early ideas were not particularly his own. The spirit of his age fostered the conviction that theological thinking was a thing of the past; that God was dead, if I may anticipate Nietzsche's formulation; that henceforth the human mind would be dominated by scientific thinking; that the feudal system or the monarchic structure was disappearing along with theology; that it was to be the scientist and industrialist who would dominate the society of our time. (Aaron 1967:83)

After the middle of the nineteenth century, the makers of narrative seemed inalterably committed to the belief that universal truth could and would be found in science, and its application to the needs of humankind would produce the long-sought order to social existence. While, unlike their predecessors, they may not have presumed to know life's purpose, they were confident they knew how to find it. The unknown would become

known, all of the universe would be brought under the tent, and death would no longer hold power over humanity. History tells us that the human animal seeks harmony between lived experience and its nomos, or the story that puts that experience into what Berger (1967:54) referred to as an "all embracing transcendent fabric of meaning." Modern humankind employed the all-embracing fabric of science as a means of obtaining that harmony.

Barzun (2000:29-30) drew a link between scientific determinism and the earlier belief in predestination that bolsters this view of science as defense against meaningless-ness. He maintained that people may not believe in predetermined damnation:

> But they do believe in scientific determinism—the unbreakable sequence of cause and effect, and that is predestination. It is the assumption all laboratory workers make and it rules out free will. Any present state of fact, any action taken, is the inevitable outcome of a series of events going back to the Big Bang that produced the universe.

The role of the individual. Along with doubt, science carried the objectification of meaning to new levels. As previously noted, "When science is being done, society is kept at bay" (Shapin 1996:162). Truth is better determined by objective observation than subjective experience, and at the end of that activity lies true understanding, or the real order, or the ultimate nomos, and this understanding is ostensibly accessible to the lone individual without the necessity of social discourse. Some religions offer a similar pass to the individual, but only the modern individual, with science and empiricism as his tools, is free to independently discover new territory and alter the nomos. The modern narrative directly links the individual to the cosmos and holds out the simple promise that human-

kind can and will achieve mastery over death by understanding and controlling the material world. Immortality power is locked up in the laws governing the universe, and knowledge is the key to unlocking that power.

According to the modern nomos, through the concerted efforts of individuals we can expose life's mysteries and uncover its meaning. The individual working alone has the freedom and the capacity to discern the nature of reality, or some aspect thereof, and his or her assessment will be given credence provided it is reasonable in light of empirical objective evidence. Various modern philosophers may have disagreed over the importance of reason versus empiricism and deduction versus induction, but all validated the right of the individual to pursue truth. In the modern age the lone individual, backed by the theodicy of empirical observation, became *the* agent in the construction of the grand social narrative.

In the modern age the individual not only has increased capacity to choose a narrative but also comes under greater pressure to make a personal choice. Pascal was the first Westerner to make this claim and in a sense was the first modern (Armstrong 1993: 298). The political foundations of the metanarratives of the previous era had been seriously weakened, and their powers of imposition diminished. As Anderson (1990:114) observed, "The individual personality born out of the collapse of the medieval monolith must *choose* and keep choosing...who to be, what to believe in, how to live. The individual in search of self-identity becomes a consumer of reality...[and] death becomes a delineator of personal life." The modern individual can choose from an array of socially constructed metanarratives or cobble together a composite of science, religion, and

personal myth to fend off the monster at the edge of the village, and he or she does this

without guarantee of communal support. As Berger (1967:133-134) observed, this new

individualism had a significant impact on the nature of religion:

> [Religion] is located in the private sphere of everyday social life and is marked by the very peculiar traits of this sphere in modern society. One of the essential traits is that of "individualization." This means that privatized religion is a matter of the "choice" or "preference" of the individual or the nuclear family, *ipso facto* lacking in common, binding quality. Such private religiosity, however "real" it may be to the individuals who adopt it, cannot any longer fulfill the classical task of religion, that of constructing a common world within which all of social life receives ultimate meaning binding on everybody.

The individualization of religion, with its roots in the Reformation (Barzun 2000:43), in

the modern context weakens its role as a guarantor of life's significance. While it grants

some freedom to the individual to construct a plausible nomos, it lacks one of the timeless

and essential ingredients of such a nomos–a common worldview–and in this regard

presages postmodernity. Human beings seek comfort against chaos and death in the

company of the like-minded, and individualism can pose a challenge to any collective

constructions of meaning.

If the primitive nomos was consanguineous, given at birth through clan or tribal

identity, and the nomoi of civilization, while still ascribed at birth, were to varying degrees

in competition with each other, the modern individual, to a degree unknown by the earliest

humans, is faced with a choice regarding nomoi. One can willfully place his or her own life

into Berger's (1967:54) all-embracing, transcendent fabric of meaning. The harmony

between lived experience and the socially constructed meaning of that of individual and

collective experience would have been near complete in primitive society, but with the rise

of civilization that harmony nearly disappeared. The modern individual is faced with an

array of worldviews from which to choose, while some individuals experiencing conditions of postmodernity resist any all-embracing, transcendent fabric for fear of being trapped in the realm of unreality, in which lived experience is in direct conflict with the reconstructed meaningful order.

For 2,500 years the human animal had been struggling to come to terms with the expanding role of the *individual* in the *social* construction of meaning, and, with the almost total objectification of the modern scientific worldview, each individual was granted license to have a turn at the construction of meaning as long as they adhered to the proper method. Much of the modern experience has been taken up with efforts to reconcile ourselves to the implications of the potential disintegration inherent in such a nomos.

One indication of this disintegration is the tension between individualism and universalism, which is an aspect that Heelas (1998:2-8) referred to as the contradictory forces of "differentiation" and "dedifferentiation." On the one hand, there appeared in the modern age a greater appreciation for and acceptance of diversity and individuality, as manifested in such phenomena as the division of labor, work versus home, public versus private, Protestant versus Catholic, sacred versus secular, and so forth. He argued that these dichotomies suggest an attempt to differentiate or distinguish by finding the essence of things. On the other hand, paralleling this differentiation was the search for inclusive or unifying themes, as in humanism, Kant's universal and categorical moral imperatives, and the Romantic allusion to a unifying soul. One could argue, then, that, as social diversity increased, so did the need and desire for individual expression, which no longer found its

home in collective experience. Yet the hunger for collective experience never abated, and even as humans asserted their individual humanity they sought justification not in nihilism but in some overarching universal principles. The entire modern era can be understood as a struggle between these two contradictory desires, and much modern thought, whether in science, religion, philosophy, or political economy, centers on this tension between individual agency and an innate desire to lose the self in a nomos or in some overarching meaningful order.

From the time Descartes centered the search for truth in subjective experience, individualism had grown in importance. Descartes is generally credited with being the first modern philosopher because he was the first to question the staying power of traditional social and intellectual structures. He felt they would vanish under critical scrutiny as philosophy employed the same austere rigor as the natural sciences (Grafton 1996:40). Only by adhering to a rigid methodology based on reason and doubt could one avoid the illusions of the current belief systems and determine that which is true, certain, and beyond all doubt. "What is so tremendously new and important about Descartes, however, is not so much his insistence on certainty, as his emphasis on subjectivity, on one's own thoughts and experience as primary. The authority of philosophy is now to be found not in the sages or the Scriptures but in the individual mind of the philosopher" (Solomon & Higgins 1997:75). The primacy of subjective experience is a foundation stone of modernity as the individual assumed greater freedom and responsibility in constructing a meaningful universe.

Becker (1975:71-72) labeled the modern narrative "scientific individualism," observing that it burst forth from the Renaissance and the Reformation as a new secular ideology to replace all previous ideologies of immortality. "This was a new Faustian pursuit of immortality based on the gifts of the individual." Humankind was to learn the truth and achieve dominion over nature. The modern narrative, over 500 years in the making, ensured humankind that knowledge is power, and knowledge is attainable through the disciplined utilization of reason and observation. With this knowledge we would not only control the material world but also eventually uncover the mysteries of the universe and discover our true significance. Knowledge and not faith would be our salvation and our hedge against the void of death.

Anticipation of postmodernity. Anticipating the next epoch, postmodernity is a logical progression of the tension between individual and social constructions of meaning, as it tips the scales even more toward individual reality construction. With no agreed upon center or no single point of reference from which to judge worldviews, the postmodern individual is free to choose among existing "truths" or construct her or his own narrative defense against chaos and death. Doubt, a foundation stone of the modern narrative, undermined faith-based narratives but with the reassurance that science would ultimately produce the "true" meaning of life. That is, doubt was a tool for eliminating doubt; everything would be doubted until proven "scientifically" to be true. By the mid-twentieth century this path to truth seemed wanting to increasing numbers of critics, and alternative views began to emerge. At the end of the Second World War, Fromm (1947:5) wrote that

the Enlightenment taught humankind that reason could be the guide to establishing ethical norms without need of revelation or the authority of the church. However, growing doubt regarding the power of reason resulted in "the acceptance of a relativistic position which proposes that value judgments and ethical norms are exclusively matters of taste or arbitrary preference and that no objectively valid statement can be made in this realm."

Zygmunt Bauman (1997:2-3), in his postmodern reconsideration of Freud's observations regarding the discontents of modernity, also spoke of the shift toward the primacy of the individual in the construction of order:

> Sixty-five years after *Civilization and Its Discontents* was written and published, individual freedom rules supreme; it is the value by which all other values came to be evaluated, and the benchmark against which the wisdom of all supra-individual rules and resolutions are to be measured. This does not mean, though, that the ideals of beauty, purity and order which sent men and women on their modern voyage of discovery have been forsaken, or lost any of their original lustre. Now, however, they are to be pursued–and fulfilled–through individual spontaneity, will and effort....Individual freedom, once a liability and a problem (perhaps *the* problem) for all order-builders, became the major asset and resource in the perpetual self-creation of the human universe.

Doubt about the Enlightenment worldview and the rational pursuit of absolute truth set the stage for experimentation with new ways of understanding the universe and humankind's place in it. This experimentation is one element in the mix we call postmodernity.

Postmodern Society

Overview: Transition or new era? In the latter half of the twentieth century, after two world conflagrations, persistent injustice, inequality, and seemingly intractable social problems, some writers began to question the modern promise of science and to speak of a

new postmodern era. As with the Judeo-Christian story at the dawn of the Enlightenment, confidence in the power of science as a defense against meaninglessness began to weaken in the early years of the twentieth century, and some writers began to experiment with new worldviews that would more readily concur with lived experience of late twentieth century humankind. The conception of a mechanical universe ruled by absolute and unchanging laws grew ever more tenuous, and the search for some new nomos heated up. However, unlike previous eras, we do not know where this one will lead or whether in hindsight the postmodern era will be anything more than a transition to some new dominant narrative.

Yet we can say with confidence that many writers today reject the assumed universal truths that supported the modern narrative, and this rejection creates a dilemma: in the absence of a common narrative, what "truths" provide the basis for human social life? Bauman (1990:231) maintained that this "ambivalence of knowledge constantly prompts efforts to 'fix' certain knowledge as obligatory and unflexible...to force through a belief that this knowledge and this knowledge alone is faultless," but he proposed a way around this inflexibility. He maintains that a "postmodern standpoint" provides a "strategy of negotiation" that allows for ambiguity and uncertainty. "Postmodernity affirms a decentered, fragmented social order that, ideally, creates the institutional spaces for continuous discourse, contestation, and negotiation in the face of endemic sociopolitical conflicts" (Seidman 1998:316-317). A change in the role of sociology from a discipline that searches for foundations to one that interprets cultures, "facilitating the mutual understanding of diverse communities," provides a way out of the dilemma created by competing truths (318). While this change in roles may be worthwhile, it seems that a basic dilemma of

postmodernity remains: what transcendent "truths" does the sociologist employ in mediat-

ing these differences between competing views of reality? Many individuals and factions

may be open to this role for sociology, but it seems that such openness must be predicated

on some prior appreciation or acceptance of ambiguity. What is the basis for negotiating

among those many individuals and groups who cling to the faultless nature of their truth?

That is, if one believes one's truth is absolute, there is by definition no room for negotia-

tion. Bauman (1990:231) himself observed that "the presumption of monopoly, of exclu-

sivity, of non-competition is contained in the very idea of truth." Given this presumption,

what tools will the sociologist as negotiator use to overcome the inherent conflict existing

between multiple exclusive truths? If each truth is perceived by its believers as exclusive,

what is the basis for negotiation and interpretation? Bauman suggested promoting toler-

ance and mutual understanding, but these are universalizing principles that may run

counter to the very beliefs the negotiator wishes to overcome. If philosophy, religion,

reason, or science has not cemented the human spirit in a united struggle for species

survival, what will? What will prevent disparate groups and individual keepers of exclusive

truth from threatening one another? This dilemma pervades the current transition and

efforts to understand the postmodern human condition, and it remains to be seen how or

whether it will be resolved.

Like the modern era, it is difficult to pinpoint an exact beginning for postmoder-

nity. The philosophical seeds of this transformation were contained in the existentialism of

Kierkegaard and the nihilism of Nietzsche, while the scientific impetus for this shift in

narratives came with Einstein's challenge to the Newtonian mechanistic view of physical

reality. Some have located its origins in the 1930s in the works of such writers as Unamuno and Ortega (Anderson 1998), while still others mark its beginning with 1970s publications of writers like Lyotard and Rorty (Lemert 1993:493). These later thinkers were among the first to assert that there exists no universal agreement regarding the real and no single story in which all can believe. However, regardless of the precise birth date of postmodern writing, suffice to say that this body of work did not exist prior to the twentieth century and grew exponentially in the latter half of that century.

Characteristics. The population growth that began with domestication of the food supply has continued to accelerate to the point that there is today concern for the earth's carrying capacity. In addition, populations have continued to mix and mingle in ways unimaginable to our earliest ancestors. A social animal weaned on millions of years of consanguinity and primary relationships is now in daily contact, both directly and through various forms of mass media, with thousands of people with whom they share little more than a common humanity. As will be addressed later, the task of constructing a meaningful order from this mix of cultures and experiences is daunting.

The pace of change is a central feature of postmodern existence and has had a significant impact on humankind's attempts to create meaningful order. When measured against the backdrop of previous human history, the human animal today experiences a dizzying degree of social change in a single lifetime. Like the proverbial fish in water, we are not fully aware of the significance of this reality, but significant it must be. The human animal adapted to a world that changed little or not at all for countless generations, one in

which an individual would "know" in its marrow the terrain, the weather, the sights, the sounds, the smells, the friends, the foes, the food, the drink, and the reasons behind it all. One would have been faced with little that was new and nothing that could not be explained and placed in the collectively understood order of things. In conditions of postmodernity, on the other hand, the human animal is faced with new experiences almost daily, and there is little agreement as to how these experiences fit into overall meaning. Rapid change is no friend to the social construction of meaning, and postmodernism is in part a reflection of this condition.

As a relatively recent outgrowth of modern society, the structure and physical characteristics of postmodernity differ from those of modernity more in degree than kind. Populations are overwhelmingly concentrated in enormous urban centers that are collections of multiple communities that are both distinct and interconnected. While particular communities may be more or less segregated by class, ethnicity, and so forth, the urban center of the twenty-first century is probably the most heterogeneous community ever experienced by the human animal, making the social construction of a plausible nomos ever more difficult. The different traditions and experiences of these varied individuals and populations impede the construction of an all-embracing worldview capable of connecting the diverse inhabitants to a cosmic order.

Globalization has also continued apace, one consequence of which has been increasing contact between people of different cultures and traditions. Any individual or group today faces growing difficulty in insulating themselves against contrary beliefs and traditions. As much as we may wish to cling to some cherished belief or some meaningful

order, immigration, the ease of travel, and mass communication all present daily challenges to that perceived order. A social construction that strikes a positive chord with one party may be a threat or totally irrelevant to the daily experiences of another, which is a condition that leads some people to cling fervently to their beliefs while discounting all alternatives.

Inextricably linked to the process of globalization is the elevated role of the economy in social organization. In the global village, the economy has little competition from other social institutions as there has evolved a tacit acceptance that all other institutions are subordinate. However, a narrative reduced almost exclusively to issues regarding the distribution of resources is severely restricted in its capacity to bring order and meaning to life, and postmodernism seems to be in part a reaction to the parsimony of a nomos overwhelmed by economic consideration. It would seem that the human animal at its most basic level needs to know where it came from, where it is going, and how to get there, and, Weber notwithstanding, the narrow perspective of free market capitalism is ill-suited to address such questions. Indeed, the intense reaction of fundamentalists of all varieties around the world may be in part a reflection of the weakness of a nomos based almost exclusively on secular economics.

The concept of postmodernity is somewhat difficult to define precisely because of the conditions it tries to capture. In the words of Barry Smart (1993:11), "Could it be that such very mixed reactions to the nebulous notion of postmodernity betray traces of the very conditions to which the term tentatively and not a little ambiguously refers?" If, as postmodernism maintains, there is no center or no universal understanding of the nature of

reality, that is, no reference point, how does one clearly define anything? Furthermore, as is the case with much philosophy and social theory, the distinction between prescription and description is somewhat blurred. We speak of postmodernism and postmodernity, but it is often unclear as to whether we are simply describing current conditions or prescribing a means of understanding and negotiating those conditions. That is, are we describing things as they are or as they ought to be? The intended focus here is on the former. Postmodernity here will refer to that set of current social conditions characterized by the following:

> An end of the dominance of an overarching belief in scientific rationality and a unitary theory of progress, the replacement of empiricist theories of representation and truth, and increased emphasis on the importance of the unconscious, on free-floating signs and images, and a plurality of viewpoints. (Jary & Jary 1991:375-376)

> Beginning in the second half of the twentieth century, philosophers and social

critics began to describe a world in which there no longer existed a grand narrative. The absence of a unifying story or center on which to anchor the human experience then became the defining characteristic of postmodernity. With no objective center, subjective experience has taken on greater significance, and the individual has the freedom to choose among a smorgasbord of worldviews or to create one's own meaningful order and defense against mortality. Whether making a choice or cobbling together one's own personal nomos, the individual confronts a situation for which he or she is ill-prepared, because the human practice of creating meaning from lived experience has always and everywhere been a social enterprise and not an individual one. While an individual may be capable of creating a quite plausible meaningful order, can such an individually constructed reality be

gratifying? If the human animal seeks defense against death in the company of like-minded people, can a uniquely individual construction of reality suffice as an effective defense against the dread of insignificance? Given that we still bother to share our ideas with others in the public forum, one might conclude that the desire to share meaning with others is alive and well. We continue to try to convince one another of the "rightness" of our views even while arguing that there can be no such single truth.

The road to postmodernity. Like the evolution of previous nomoi, the emergence of the postmodern worldview was a gradual and cumulative process, the seeds of which could even be recognized in some of the writings of classical Greece, prior even to the evolution of modernity. However, the first discernible indicators of this shift in thinking in the modern era did not appear until the middle of the nineteenth century and continued to build over the next hundred years. What follows is a very brief review of some of the ideas comprising the transition from modern to postmodern.

One of the first foreshadowings of the decline of the modern worldview came with Kierkegaard's argument that there is no ultimately rational basis for believing the Christian narrative and that one must, therefore, make a leap of faith, with no guarantees of salvation (Solomon & Higgins 1997:102). Kierkegaard was a modern writer still wrestling with Christianity, a premodern narrative. Apparently unable or unwilling to accept the modern nomos as a defense against death, he stepped outside the narrative of reason and empiricism and embraced faith as the ultimate defense against chaos. In doing so, he opened the modern narrative to question by casting doubt on the power of reason and the senses to

reveal objective and universal truths. Kierkegaard's questioning of reason gave impetus to existentialism, that is, the argument that we cannot judge how to lead our own lives against objective truth, that existence precedes essence, and that humankind is free to make choices (Angeles 1981:88; Baldwin 1995:259). Existentialism in turn presaged the postmodernist's skepticism regarding the Enlightenment grand narrative. Kierkegaard raised doubt about the prevailing nomos and answered that doubt with a return to a premodern theodicy and nomos, and, in an apparent effort to create harmony between experience and the order imposed on that experience, Kierkegaard returned to a theodicy critical to the previous nomos: faith.

Postmodernism has been defined by some as the culmination of a "longstanding series of engagements with modernism," the roots of which can be traced back to the work of Nietzsche (Smart 1993:18). Like Kierkegaard, he denied the power of reason to determine objective truth and believed one is free to make choices. However, rather than putting faith in the Christian narrative, he chose a path of self-creation through the force of will. Nietzsche too denied the existence of objective reality saying the apparent world is the only world (Collinson 1987:120). Indeed, as Fukuyama (1999:65) noted, he is "the father of modern relativism....Nietzsche's aphorism 'there are no facts, only interpretations' became the watchword for later generations of relativists under the banners of deconstructionism and postmodernism." In challenging rationalism and objective truth and in rejecting God, he challenged both the Christian narrative and an implicit goal of the modern narrative: to ultimately understand the mind of God. If there is no objective truth,

there is no puzzle for empirical science to discern, and that enterprise becomes a wasted effort and an act of bad faith.

Having dispensed with the God of the old narrative, Nietzsche nevertheless seems no more resigned to chaos and meaninglessness than his predecessors. Instead of placing his faith in Christianity, he envisioned a means for the individual to become his own reason for being. In other words, Nietzsche did not give up the search for salvation (i.e., a personal defense against insignificance) but merely transferred the responsibility for redemption entirely to the individual. He argued that humankind's instinct is to assert its power and to dominate, and the Judeo-Christian tradition has perverted that instinct. Salvation can be found in an embrace of those innate drives denied by Christianity. According to Nietzsche, severity and violence are as necessary to human survival as kindliness and peace, for if evil was not necessary it would have disappeared (Durant 1961:422-423). Therefore, the way to salvation lies in the maximization of the power of the individual, or in becoming a *superman*.

Nietzsche further argued that we should not view this life as a highway to some great beyond but rather as eternally recurring, which is a concept that makes this life everything. Consequently, we should give up the idea of truth and focus on living well (Solomon & Higgins 1997:108). The path to immortality is the perfectibility of genius in an eternally recurring universe. As Durant (1961:418) noted, "Nietzsche is not content with having created God in his own image; he must make himself immortal. After the superman comes eternal recurrence. All things will return, in precise detail, and an infinite

number of times." Nietzsche rejected all traditional grand narratives and substituted the

narrative of personal redemption and salvation.

Like so many others who have explored new ways of understanding reality and

bringing meaning to experience, Nietzsche was reacting in part to social upheaval. He was

writing during a period of unrest in Europe, particularly in Germany, and his preoccupa-

tion with power may be a reflection of this uncertainty. As per Durant (1961:402-409,

442), he became the voice of a more militaristic and industrialized Germany, extolling the

Dyonisian aspects of German music over the Appolonian art of Italy and France. While

there may be question as to whether it was his intent to promote German militarism, there

were those who adapted Nietzsche's ideas in this cause.

> The popular image of him is as someone who advocated a ruthless and
> passionate pursuit of power, yet in his private life he was gentle, courteous and
> considerate. He is often associated, again in popular conceptions of his thought,
> with Nazism and Hitlerism, and there is no doubt that many of his ideas were en-
> tirely apt for exploitation by these movements. His sister, in her old age, regarded
> Hitler as the embodiment of the Ubermensch, or Superman, eulogized by
> Nietzsche. (Collinson 1987:119)

Regardless of his intent relative to German militarism, in a world of change and

confusion, Nietzsche fell back on the primitive practice of limiting the nomos to a single

tribe (albeit a mythical one) while at the same time advancing the argument for individual

agency. This argument would become a theme of postmodernism. That is, German

nationalism, with its presumption of a common genetic heritage, is akin to tribalism, and

the individual will to power became the universal belief binding all Germans in a single

purpose: the purpose of overpowering death itself through sheer force of will.

Mid-twentieth century existentialists such as Camus and Sartre were influenced by Kierkegaard's rejection of reason, but, rather than take his leap of faith, they accepted Nietzsche's rejection of God and his emphasis on human agency. They were secular humanists who believed the individual holds the key to his or her own meaning, which springs from a well of human experience. Not only is the individual responsible for his or her own meaning but also it is humankind's duty to pursue life with enthusiasm (Herman & Stebben 1999:103-104). If to be "enthused" is to be "filled with God," humankind was now supposed to be filled with self. A fully lived life is its own justification and its own salvation; nothing more is necessary. Camus (1958) spotlighted man's search for an innerkingdom, Sartre focused on the meaning of individual apprehension of existence, and Husserl sought the path to universal understanding through individual consciousness (Collinson 1987:129, 158). Heideggar extended Husserl's phenomenology and argued that each of us is free to create our own meaning without universals or ultimate truth by concentrating on our own unique being. "We are each a being unto death...free to make life meaningful in the face of death" (Popkin & Stroll 1993:310-311). Existentialism furthered the shift in the locus of meaning from a community of believers (whether in science or religion) to the lone willful individual.

While existentialism offered a new way for the individual to establish a life of meaning, Thomas Kuhn raised additional questions regarding the legitimacy of the modern narrative and moved a step closer to a postmodern view of science (Anderson 1990:72-73). Kuhn (1970) challenged the infallibility of the scientific narrative, not just in the sense that scientists like everyone else are sometimes wrong but also that the very principles on

which science is based are subject to change. He asserted that the foundation of the scientific paradigm and the rational progression of knowledge toward ultimate truth is fallible, thereby casting doubt on the entire scientific enterprise and suggesting that our modern defense against mortality might be built on shifting sand. Science was supposed to lead us to ultimate reality, or the quintessential order of the universe and away from chaos and meaninglessness. But if its most basic components are insubstantial and fluid, how can it provide any real defense against our fear of chaos?

Doubts about the scientific worldview continued to generate alternative models through the 1960s and 1970s, and two such related initiatives were poststructuralism and deconstructionism. Neither is synonymous with postmodernism, but what they held in common was a dissatisfaction with all or parts of the modern grand narrative, with the "limitations of modernism, its tarnished ambitions, unfulfilled promises, and the dilemmas that follow from facing up to the loss of the vision of redemption through art, literature and culture" (Smart 1993:21). Because of this dissatisfaction, the image of some fixed structure, whether that of a given society or a mechanistic universe, seemed implausible to some writers and lost its capacity to explain what Huston Smith (1995:204) called "the ultimate nature of things."

Prominent among the poststructuralists was Michel Foucault, whose search for truth led him to explore the relationship between power and knowledge (Lemert 1993:517). Power is granted to those who control cultural knowledge, or discourse, and in a self-perpetuating cycle the discourse is controlled by those with power. That is, power is not simply a function of merit judged against a set of objective principles but rather a

product of the manipulation of knowledge. For example, "For a class to become a dominant class, for it to ensure its domination, and for that domination to reproduce itself is certainly the effect of a number of actual premeditated tactics operating within the grand strategies that ensure this domination" (Foucault 1977:203). A thorough treatment of Foucault's work (or of anyone else's) is well beyond the scope of this dissertation, but it does seem that he moved ideas about reality away from the Enlightenment adherence to a set of universal principles and toward a more pluralistic decentered view of reality construction.

Deconstructionism continues the subversive themes of poststructuralism with its questioning of the modern narrative search for *the* center. As per deconstructionists such as Derrida, centers tend to exclude and marginalize some segments of the population. In other words, we may say that the center forms the core of a narrative, which excludes those not served by the narrative. Western philosophy has been concerned with the essence of things, but deconstruction argues no written work can be anchored by such absolutes. Writing always leaves something out, and something is inevitably excluded (Anderson 1990:90-91). If the prevailing narrative—whether philosophic, religious, or scientific—offers no immortality power to some, deconstruction seems to argue that those people should not be compelled to suffer the constraints of its tenets.

Transition from modernity to postmodernity. The twentieth century was marked by continuous political conflict punctuated by two world wars, the second of which involved the attempted extermination of European Jews, followed by a cold war that

threatened humankind's very existence. One can readily understand why some people began to question the immortality power of science and the mechanistic worldview, since this narrative had led humankind to the very brink of chaos. An effective nomos is one that brings order to chaos and not vice versa. Thus, by mid-century, writers such as those noted above began seriously questioning the current nomos. However, as with previous transitions, the old nomos has not simply exited quietly.

A nomos is by definition a social construction that provides order and meaning, and a meaningful order is not something easily surrendered once accepted, regardless of how flawed it may be. Once a nomos is widely adopted as defense against the dread of chaos, that is, once it has accomplished some degree of functionality, it does not easily give way to a new worldview. Power naturally accrues to those who are perceived to be the keepers and protectors of the nomos, and that power in turn enhances their abilities to perpetuate a worldview that is in keeping with their hold on power. Reason is defined in relationship to this nomos, so that almost any defense of that nomos can be defined as rational. Centers of power and the socially constructed order are engaged in a dance in which each reinforces the other over centuries of negotiation (or in an occasional over-night conversation, as was the case with Constantine). Consequently, any new nomos must contend with resistance from those who have a vested interest in the current world-view, whether that worldview legitimizes their power, continues to at least partially comport with their experience of the world, or both. In the evolution of Western society, philosophy struggled against theism, monotheism struggled against polytheism, and science struggled against monotheism. Now relativists of various stripes struggle against

the Enlightenment pursuit of absolute truth. This argument is not unlike that of the Marxists who maintained that those in power protect their position by trying to control the ideology; however, it is not only class consciousness that necessarily introduces a change in ideology but also the variety of lived human experience that has grown exponentially since the rise of civilization. As powerful as a nomos is, history shows us that human beings continuously struggle to either force experience to fit their understanding of life's meaning or adjust that understanding to fit experience.

If one accepts that the ultimate purpose of a nomos is to create some order in which we can find meaning and purpose, challenge to that nomos is likely to occur when it fails in this basic function and when it loses its plausibility for at least some of those under its canopy. As outlined earlier, the Judeo-Christian narrative evolved out of the need, at least in the West, to create order from the disparate experiences of citizens of increasingly diverse, large-scale societies, but this nomos began to face serious challenges when it no longer provided meaning for some people, and it no longer provided meaning when literacy, empirical observation, growing individual freedom, and reason led to doubts regarding many of its basic tenets. What ensued in the late Middle Ages was a power struggle between the nascent scientific worldview and the established theological nomos, with the former ultimately overtaking the latter and settling into a delicate truce, resulting in a postmodern situation in which neither enjoys full legitimacy.

The ultimate legitimacy of a nomos is contained in its ability to adequately make sense of the lived experiences of the population under its canopy. When that ability is threatened or weakens, one response of those with an interest in its survival is to resort to

force to either maintain the status quo or reassert themselves and their position in the cosmos. Since the rise of civilization, one obvious means of doing so has been to wage war on those who present a real or potential threat to a group's assurance of its place in the universe. Of course people also go to war over resources, land, etcetera, but such collective violence is typically supported by an assurance that the group is acting to maintain or restore the rightful order to the cosmos. It is, as Berger might say, a nomizing activity.

The history of the twentieth century, with two world wars, the holocaust, and the cold war, suggests the failure of the modern nomos as a plausible defense against human-kind's fear of insignificance. The nuclear threat usurped God's role as Creator/Destroyer and threatened all of humanity with chaos. Had reason, objectivity, and the scientific pursuit of the ultimate meaning and purpose of life been satisfying to people of different national and cultural experiences, these differences might not have erupted into open conflicts. The conviction that humankind was at least on the trail of ultimate truth might have been enough to foster greater cooperation and mitigate differences. However, the twentieth century showed the modern nomos to be a very flawed canopy of protection from chaos, and the more tribal-like nomoi of a previous era resurfaced (if indeed they were ever submerged) in the form of nationalism. Yet, there seems to exist a major distinction between tribal nomoi and these more recent adaptations: the former could achieve plausibility by harmonizing with lived experience, while the latter can achieve nothing like the same degree of plausibility. In the absence of this capacity to harmonize,

nations resorted to the use of power to drive home their message to both their own populations and those with opposing worldviews.

Power became the basis for establishing the legitimacy of a nomos, and rationality was defined by the dominant worldview. That is, if one accepts the worldview that the West occupied the pinnacle of the Darwinian hierarchy, colonialism follows as logical means of relating to non-Westerners. But of course such an arrangement is tenuous, particularly when people are exposed to a constant stream of information and diverse experience. The Enlightenment narrative could not hold, and the many lesser political narratives could hold only to the degree that they could maintain their power. This struggle for preeminence defines the last century, the end of which saw the collapse of the communist political narrative and the seeming triumph of the "modern" Western political narrative. However, the reemergence of various ethnic conflicts and the rise of Islamic and other fundamentalisms may be taken as further evidence that a nomos cannot survive on power alone: it must have plausibility.

Into the vacuum left by the collapse of the modern grand narrative came numerous competing narratives and a new worldview that proposed the novel possibility of accepting them all. Rejecting power as a source of legitimacy, many people resisted imposing a worldview on anyone or having a worldview imposed on them, and the transition to postmodernity was complete.

The new nomos and its theodicy: Relativism and irony. The fundamental concept of the postmodern nomos is relativism; the universe is not a divinely manufactured ma-

chine whose workings await our reasoning and scientific skill to discern but is rather a changing reality whose description is relative to subjective perception. In the face of today's enormous diversity of human experience and backed by changes in the scientific understanding of the physical universe, some writers experiencing these postmodern conditions have abandoned the search for absolute truth and have instead assumed a willingness to accept the relative truth of almost any worldview. Herein lies the postmodern addition to the accumulated defenses against chaos.

Interaction among diverse peoples is greater today than at any point in human history, making the social construction of a meaningful nomos increasingly difficult. The continuity between the individual, the collectivity, and nature—what Berger (1967:61) referred to as "the totality of being" inherent in primitive society—is absent, and one result is continuous and widespread disagreement over the social definition of reality. The nomoi of previous eras compete not only with one another but also with the endless creation of new variations and new narratives, each trying to address the lived experiences and/or traditions of different groups. The nomos that accompanied the rise of European civilization prior to the Renaissance, what Crosby (1997:23) referred to as the "Venerable Model, maintained a near monopoly in European common sense for so many generations because ... as a whole it squared with actual experience." It only began to lose its grip when that congruity started to slip. It was replaced by the modern worldview, which continues to hold, but only tenuously, as it too has failed to square with the lived experience of many of the world's citizens. In a world of instant communication and intimate contact between diverse peoples, a common narrative is very difficult to define, let alone sustain. We are

overwhelmed by information. "Information makes life difficult for anyone who would like to hold on to a story in its pure form. Information acts upon stories as rain acts upon sand castles. It discredits them, deconstructs them, refutes their prophecies, and complicates their lives" (Anderson 1990:249). Such conditions threaten the plausibility of existing nomoi and complicate the construction of new ones.

Throughout human history immortality power has been drawn from some socially constructed center, and this center has been anchored by what was thought to be universally true, whether among tribesmen, the faithful, or members of the academy. However, within conditions of postmodernity, the trust in some centering universal truth no longer holds for some people. Indeed, where one stands in the culture wars today depends largely on whether or he or she clings to a belief in universal truth (Lemert 1993:502). Those who see the current era as a continuation of modernity tend to discern such truths, while those who argue this era to be something different, that is, postmodern, doubt such universals. In the absence of some such truths there can be *ipso facto* no single socially constructed reality.

As previously suggested, postmodernism, if not postmodernity, is marked by a disappointment with modernity, and this disappointment has impacted postmodern attitudes toward reality construction. Since the rise of civilization, each new nomos has, by definition, offered the solace and assurance of certainty and of having come to grips with the changing reality. Empirical science, along with the related attributes of modernity, offered this promise, but many people, particularly those marginalized from the centers of power (i.e., of reality construction), were disappointed by science's inadequacy in providing

gratifying explanations of the ultimate nature of reality and unnerved by its capacity to destroy humankind. Any defense against mortality offered by the modern nomos is challenged by the reality of Nagasaki. As Smart (1993:27) observed, rather than conceived as some new epic, postmodernity may be understood as "a way of relating to the limits and limitations of modernity, a way of living with the realization that the promise of modernity to deliver order, certainty and security will remain unfulfilled."

The human animal is a quintessentially social creature in life and in our anticipation of death. Moreover, we are both the creators and the product of an evolutionary process that has left us with this essential dilemma succinctly stated by anthropologist Peter Farb (1978:129-130): "We are severely hampered in coping with the ills of today's world by the paradox that the human brain evolved during the hunting-gathering adaptation, whereas our deepest philosophical and moral convictions were molded early in the adaptation to food production." I would add that these moral and philosophical adaptations to food production were driven by an innate drive to replicate the moral imperatives of small, kin-based bands of hunters/gatherers, and we now struggle to satisfy our most basic need for meaning in a rapidly changing and complex world in which none of our earlier stories succeeds in overcoming the fear of meaninglessness and insignificance. We face death and its suggestion of chaos uncertain that we are in the company of like-minded people while we search endlessly for that company.

As per Becker (1975:32-37), to be human is to experience guilt and to fear a death without redemption. We experience guilt about our bodies and its functions and about the unintended consequences of our actions on others simply when we act as ourselves. We

feel guilt over failed accomplishment and over pleasures, and, perhaps most significantly, we experience guilt over our feelings of aggression toward those we love. Primitives were perhaps more honest about these things because they would have been, by necessity, more realistic about humankind's helplessness against nature. "Primitive man embedded social life in a sacred matrix not necessarily because he was more fearful or masochistic than men in later epochs, but because he saw reality more clearly in some basic ways" (36). He experienced redemption through connection to others or to something larger than self and this is an attitude that may still be expressed in myriad ways.

> Each heroic apotheosis is a variation on basic themes because man is still man. Civilization, the rise of the state, kingship, the universal religions–all are fed by the same psychological dynamic: guilt and the need for redemption. If it is no longer the clan that reflects the collective immortality pool, then it is the state, the nation, the revolutionary cell, the corporation, the scientific society, ones own race. (119)

To reiterate Smart's (1993:21) observation, postmodernism seems to be concerned with "the limits and limitations of modernism's tarnished ambitions, unfulfilled promises, and the dilemmas that follow from facing up to loss of the vision of redemption through art, literature and culture." Redemption is the assurance that life indeed does have meaning and that all is not ultimately chaos, and its pursuit is unlikely to cease simply because of past disappointments. Traditional nomoi continue to hold meaning for billions of people in the face of "modernism's tarnished ambitions," and the pursuit of meaning seems to be as powerful as ever. Perhaps nowhere is this need more poignantly expressed than when people are willing to sacrifice themselves and others in the presumed confirmation of a particular nomoi. For example, Joseph Lelyveld (2001:52) wrote of a conversation with Ariel Merari, a professor at Tel Aviv University, regarding "suicide bombers":

> The world views of the Japanese, Tamil and Palestinian suicide bombers were as distinct as the contexts in which they operated. But if I understood the professor's point correctly, their recruiters had much in common. Each found ways of commanding the loyalty of young people only to persuade them that a meaningful death would be better than a pointless life.

Indeed, "a meaningful death would be better than a pointless life." The fact that humans are willing to sacrifice their own lives and those of others in the pursuit of meaning lends considerable weight to the argument that humans have an innate drive to create and affirm a meaningful universal order. The nihilistic suggestion that existence is pointless seems to touch no such atavistic impulse, leading to the observation that the human search for meaning is likely to be far more powerful than its opposite.

If one accepts Berger's (1967:3-5) argument that humankind erects enduring cultural symbols to quiet fears of insignificance and death, postmodern conditions are problematic. In cultures that are varied and continuously changing, which symbols have the requisite power to calm fears of insignificance? Which symbols are reinforced by which group, and which symbols represent truth? Can there be multiple realities and truths? If so, what holds them together? What keeps them from splintering into warring factions?

Postmodernism is, in some measure, a response to these questions. It is an attempt to make sense of conditions of postmodernity and made its official appearance with the publication of Lyotard's 1979 book, *The Postmodern Condition*, in which he announced the collapse of the Enlightenment grand narrative (Lemert 1993:509). Lyotard ([1979] 1993:510) argued that Hegel's *speculative narrative* harbors skepticism toward and delegitimizes positive learning, while the *emancipating narrative* of the Enlightenment is hampered by problems in its own assumptions: (1) That which is true is not necessarily

just, and (2) dividing reason between the intellect (i.e., pure) and the practical delegitimizes scientific discourse. You cannot have it both ways. Or as Wittgenstein observed, reason cannot investigate itself (Solomon & Higgins 1997:116). Reason can only lead to further reason, proof to further proof, and neither can explain why things are the way they are. Science only moves the question of ultimate cause back one step and always begs the question: what caused the cause? Lyotard ([1979] 1993:512) maintainrd that this limitation of science is "an important current of postmodernity: science plays its own game; it is incapable of legitimating the other language games....But above all, it is incapable of legitimating itself." He goes on to say that we suffer pessimism because there is no agreement on a universal metalanguage, as science is demarcated by different vocabularies and specialties and reduced to positivism. Therefore, science has no connection with emancipation. Referring to Wittgenstein's resistance to positivism and his outlining of a language game not legitimized by "performativity," Lyotard (512-513) said,

> This is what the postmodern world is all about. Most people have lost the nostalgia for the lost narrative. It in no way follows that they are reduced to barbarity. What saves them from it is their knowledge that legitimation can only spring from their own linguistic practice and communicational interaction.

In the language of Becker (1975), it may be said that what separates the postmodern human animal from all its predecessors is the degree to which it is both free to and responsible for generating its own immortality power. Conditions of postmodernity threaten the traditional role of culture "to raise men above nature, to assure them that in some ways their lives count in the universe more than merely physical things count" (4).

Baudrillard's ideas further challenge the traditional sources of immortality power by questioning their essential reality. For Baudrillard ([1983] 1993:524), the postmodern

condition is marked by a blurring of the distinction between simulation and reality to the point that simulation is no longer an imitation of the real but a substitute for it and is the only reality available. For example, in the above referenced essay, *Simulacra and Simulation: Disneyland*, Baudrillard traced the evolution of Christian icons from what he describes as their original function as reflections of a basic reality to their current separation from any reality whatsoever. The Christian icon has experienced an evolution to the point that today it "bears no relation to any reality whatever; it is its own pure simulacrum" (527).

> The transition from signs which dissimulate something to signs which dissimulate that there is nothing, marks the decisive turning point. The first implies a theology of truth and secrecy (to which the notion of ideology still belongs). The second inaugurates an age of simulacra and simulation, in which there is no longer any god to recognize his own, nor any last judgment to separate truth from false, the real from its artificial resurrection, since everything is already dead and risen in advance. (528)

Like Gertrude Stein's Kansas City, "There's no there there." Everything is simulacrum or an insubstantial representation and nothing more.

An implication of this understanding of postmodern conditions is that immortality power is not supported by anything genuine. If his observations are correct, that all is simulation, then the human capacity to create immortality power is limited only by imagination, and the practice of carving meaning out of chaos, of finding order in the universe, is a simple matter of human creativity. In the extreme, no longer must we impose order onto what passes for objective reality; we simply create the reality ourselves, packaged in whatever order we wish. It is telling that Baudrillard's microcosm of the postmodern world is Disneyland or a total simulation from which doubt has been banished. All stories

are predictable and all endings are happy. Indeed, Disney had himself cryogenized and is now waiting on ice for some future resurrection. (Baudrillard [1983] 1993:528). If we are free to create our own reality, by extension, we are free to create our own immortality, but not without a price, as will be examined later.

In spite of Lyotard's pronouncement of the death of the grand narrative and Buadrillard's observations regarding the disappearance of the real, the need to defend against powerlessness in the face of death still appears to be very much with us. Regardless of the accuracy of these assessments of postmodern conditions, such views offer little to satisfy the basic human drive for meaning. For that role we must turn to other candidates.

Anderson (1990:182) provided some clarification for those interested in the continuing postmodern search for meaning and observed: "if... the old explanations of where we came from and where we are going, seem to be in trouble, the human mind continues to think in terms of stories–naturally seeks to order experience, looks for explanations of sequences of events, is attracted to dramas." Even in this age of postmodernity in which some theorists insist on the dissolution of grand narratives, the human animal continues the pursuit of some story to give meaning to life. Anderson (243-244) has identified six general stories competing for primacy today, most of which are variations of earlier narratives:

> (1) the Western myth of progress, with its enthusiasm for technological change and economic development and its overriding image of a world in which the conditions of life keep getting better for everybody; (2) the Marxist story of revolution and international socialism; (3) the Christian fundamentalist story about a return to a society governed on the basis of Christian values and biblical belief; (4) the Islamic fundamentalist story about a return to a society governed on the basis of Islamic values and Koranic belief; (5) the Green story about rejecting the myth of progress

and governing societies according to ecological values; and (6) the "new paradigm" story about a sudden leap forward to a new way of being and a new way of understanding the world.

Anderson of course understands that these stories overlap, and within each there exists much variation, but his typology seems to capture essential themes of the various postmodern defenses against the fear that life may be of absolutely no consequence.

A telling and recurring theme in many variations of the "new paradigm" is a longing for the premodern or a reach back beyond civilization and agriculture to the days of hunting and gathering (Anderson 1990:194). This theme appeared in many otherwise disparate movements and activities: communitarianism, cults, gangs, and a kind of new tribalism in which adherents attempt to recreate the rituals of American Indians and other early traditions. These practices go to the very heart of the argument put forward in this paper: the human animal longs for a cultural body in which it can lose itself and thereby gain power over chaos, for, given our evolutionary development, the dread of insignificance is best mollified in a small group with a common worldview. In the language of Berger (1967:32), tribal conditions are marked by symmetry between objective and subjective definitions of reality. There exists a harmony between the individual's experience, his or her understanding of that experience, and the collective meaning attached to that experience. Perhaps, unfortunately, common ancestors, heritage, space, and life experiences may be necessary to any genuine power enhancing capacities of a tribe, and none of the above narratives are able to match these qualities. Nevertheless, these shortcomings are not likely to quell the appetite for a return to premodern conditions, and variations on this theme will likely persist through the era of postmodernity.

"G. K. Chesterton once said that the trouble when people stop believing in God is not that they thereafter believe in nothing; it is that they thereafter believe in anything" (Anderson 1990:187). Looking backward from the vantage point of postmodernity, his remarks seem particularly prescient. The choice of narratives today is nearly limitless. As Heelas (1998:4-8) observed, postmodernity embraces diversity over uniformity, values everyone's right to be different, encourages free expression of the self, encourages "microdiscourses, and rejects the authoritarianism and grand narratives of modernity, whether religion, science, Marxism, or whatever....Postmodern dedifferentiation is associated with the deregulation and disorganization of traditions...resulting in often ephemeral hybrids" (7). He maintained that people are now free to combine disparate symbols from different traditions (e.g., Zen and tennis) and choose lifestyles rather than follow traditional dictates. A condition of postmodernity is that truth need not be based on reason or tradition, and, indeed, truth is increasingly difficult to define to the satisfaction of disparate groups. Consequently, rather than focus on universal truths, postmodern religion offers the promise of peak experiences and is a religion to be consumed rather than practiced (4-14). The postmodern world presents the human animal with a wide selection of nomoi, ranging from traditional religious beliefs to science to Rastefarianism or whatever composite people can cobble together as a hedge against chaos.

The individualism born of civilization has become an ever more prominent doctrine through modernity and into postmodernity. As previously suggested, in many cultures today the individual has more freedom than ever to create meaning, build a defense against oblivion, and construct his or her own reality rather than simply assuming the narrative of

the particular social group. Heidegger presaged this postmodern relationship to death in which the experience is separated from its social context when he argued that the social self is an inauthentic creature who becomes authentic only at certain moments of "profound self-recognition," such as when facing one's own death. It is not death in the abstract that forces such authenticity, but it is one's own death that matters (Solomon & Higgins 1997:122). He argued that one lives a life defined at either end by nothingness, and meaning and significance can be bestowed only by oneself (Collinson 1987:153). Forces unleashed 10,000 years ago have shifted the locus of reality construction increasingly to the individual and to the point that some postmodern writers have accepted if not embraced individual reality construction as the norm.

The rationale for this shift is relatively easy to understand, but the difficulty of such a view becomes evident when we recall the overwhelmingly social nature of this enterprise throughout almost all of human history. As per Peter Berger (1967:19), "the socially constructed world is, above all, an ordering of experience. A meaningful order, or nomos, is imposed upon the discrete experiences and meanings of individuals." The creation of this meaning has always been a social activity and has carried enormous immortality power for those who share this meaning.

> The nomos locates the individual's life in an all-embracing fabric of meanings that, by its very nature, transcends that life. The individual who adequately internalizes these meanings at the same time transcends himself. His birth, the various stages of his biography and, finally, his future death may now be interpreted by him in a manner that transcends the unique place of these phenomena in his experience. (54)

Postmodern humankind searches for that all-embracing fabric, but there is no human precedent for the kind of individual reality construction envisioned by some social

observers today. Indeed, if each individual is constructing meaning on his or her own terms, there can be no all-embracing fabric of meaning. While we may convince ourselves of the universal nature of our nomos, even in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary (e.g., Timothy McVeigh or Ted Kazinsky), the human animal has never before faced death and the specter of chaos with such limited resources.

For all of human history, the narrative, even in the guise of secular science, defined the sacred cosmos and located the individual in a meaningful order. "To be in a 'right' relationship with the sacred cosmos is to be protected against the nightmare threats of chaos" (Berger 1967:26). Current social conditions, however, make this "right" relationship ever more difficult to locate and maintain: "right" with what? With no center and no agreement as to the sacred order, the postmodern human animal lives with the risk of either being perpetually at odds with the "truth" or living in a world without a basic truth. Without this connection to some accepted order, the individual risks meaninglessness and anomie, a condition, according to Berger, even more distressing than death itself (22).

At least since World War II, no single narrative has been able to serve as the source of unification. No religion, no philosophy, no science, no "ism" has had the credibility or the power to unify. "Postmodern thought is characterized by a loss of belief in an objective world and an incredulity toward metanarratives of legitimation. With a delegitimation of global systems of thought, there is no foundation to secure a universal and objective reality" (Kvale 1995:19). There is no center, and the individual is left to sort things out for himself or herself, which is a condition that is contrary to all previous human experience. Every society entails some denial of the individual self, and the nomoi facilitate

this denial (Berger 1967:55). Postmodernism abandons this denial at great peril to the individual, for it is the collectivity and not the individual that is immortal (61).

The one new theodicy that may have some currency in the postmodern age is irony, defined by *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (Woolf et al. 1973) as "an attitude of detached awareness of incongruity." Irony is a product of the mind and is free to the individual of any social position for use as a tool against chaos. "The ironical spirit rises above the eternal moral world order, for this spirit is not told what to do by anything except himself. The ironist is to do what he pleases, for his morality can only be an esthetic morality" (Steiner [1914] 1973:148) and one not bound by universal truths. Irony is the natural ally of one who feels stifled by all current and previous narratives and whose lived experiences do not comport with any nomos. By detaching, the ironist can distance himself or herself from all nomoi without flatly rejecting any of them. For the ironist, nothing is entirely plausible, but anything is possible, so he or she is free to reject the nomos without totally rejecting its possibility. If, as Berger (1967:26) suggested, being "right" with the sacred cosmic order is "the ultimate shield against terror," the ironist hedges his or her bets and commits to nothing in the hope that the "right" story will eventually come along.

Richard Rorty ([1989] 1993) spoke of this irony in terms of "final vocabularies." He asserted that postmodernity is characterized by the absence of any final authority to judge philosophical discourse and that the Plato-Kant canon is dead and has been replaced by irony as "the philosophical attitude of postmodernity" (Lemert 1993:513). He maintained that irony is one of two attitudes (theodicies) employed today for negotiating

meaning, nomos, or a "final vocabulary" (Rorty [1989] 1993:513-517). This "final vocabulary" is a personal narrative that legitimizes one's existence.

> All human beings carry about a set of words which they employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives. These are the words in which we formulate praise of our friends and contempt for our enemies, our long-term projects, our deepest self-doubts and our highest hopes. They are the words in which we tell, sometimes prospectively and sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives. (Rorty [1989] 1993:513)

It is a hallmark of postmodernity that this final vocabulary or this narrative is ultimately personal and need not necessarily be shared with anyone to be legitimate for the individual. Nevertheless, history tells us that the human animal naturally seeks converts to his or her worldview, because legitimacy is a social and not an individual phenomenon. Therefore, given the incredible importance of the narrative in giving legitimacy to our being and the tenuous social concurrence of our final vocabulary, we are very sensitive if it is threatened. If doubt is cast on our final vocabulary, there is no recourse other than helpless passivity or a resort to force (Rorty [1989] 1993:513). That is, resort to force is one way of legitimating our own existence, either individually or collectively, and one does not have to look far for manifestations of this phenomenon in countless political conflicts today. Indeed, Rorty's observation is very nearly a restatement of Lifton's (1979:304) earlier definition of an enemy as one who must die so that we may transcend death.

Again, Rorty identified two approaches to the concept of the final vocabulary, and one's recourse to the dread of insignificance can be predicted by which of the two he or she more closely follows. The "ironist" is one who has no center and no power beyond self. Relativism is the watchword of the ironist's final vocabulary. The opposite of irony is "common sense"; the individual takes his or her vocabulary to be absolute. For this

individual, the truth is set and moral identity is not open to revision. "To be commonsensical is to take for granted that statements formulated in that final vocabulary suffice to describe and judge the beliefs, actions and lives of those who employ alternative final vocabularies" (Rorty [1989] 1993:514). If one believes they know the truth, right action is a matter of common sense and serves as a buffer against chaos and confusion. However, ironists enjoy no such certainty and revise identity by revising their final vocabulary in search of the best "self." Nothing can serve as judge of final vocabulary save another vocabulary, so the ironist is forever searching and reading and looking for some self-legitimation. On the other hand, the one who follows "common sense" inevitably encounters experiences that do not logically follow from his or her worldview and is faced with either ignoring them or perhaps rationalizing them to avoid the threat to his or her nomos.

Rorty ([1989] 1993:515) goes on to say that the modern institutions of liberal, bourgeois society are supposed to allow people to work out their private salvations. This is the glue intended to hold modern society together. However, he also points out that there are at least two problems with this expectation: (1) The glue is not strong enough, that is, there is not universal agreement that these institutions are essential; and (2) it is impossible to be a liberal ironist or "to be someone for whom 'cruelty is the worst thing we do' and yet have no metaphysical beliefs about what all human beings have in common" (515). One cannot believe in the universal right of self-creation while at the same time believing there is no universal morality.

"What binds societies together are common vocabularies and common hopes... [and] the principal function of the vocabularies is to tell stories about future outcomes

which compensate for present sacrifices" (Rorty [1989] 1993:516). Because secular societies do not find hope in the hereafter, they must generate some other plausible story of social improvement, and since World War II the social creation of a plausible story has been increasingly difficult (516). Compensation for present sacrifices and plausibility are linked if we accept that the most critical function of the narrative is to give meaning to life and protection from chaos. Protection from oblivion is the ultimate purpose of our ultimate vocabularies, but finding a narrative that is both plausible and common among people with such diverse experiences is a central dilemma of the postmodern age.

Irony is fundamentally different from previous theodicies that called for active participation in the creation and re-creation of meaning. Primitive tribesmen were embedded in a world of living spirits of which they themselves were just another manifestation, while philosophers and religious believers, each in their own way, engaged each other in the continuous effort to understand, interpret, and reinterpret their respective nomoi. Science, likewise, called for the active pursuit of truth through observation and the placement of those observations in a rational and verifiable narrative. Irony, on the other hand, is a theodicy based on listening and searching for the truth among the myriad candidates already available in the reality marketplace.

Irony may have borrowed from the modern scientific worldview what Sennet (1976:43) identified as a reluctance to form judgments "until all the facts are in," only the ironist seems to take the position that "all of the facts" will never be known and that, when known, the facts do not always support each other. Perhaps because the ironists are suspicious of science's ambition to construct a utopia out of these parts of the puzzle, they

are reconciled to simply considering any number of puzzles already constructed by others. The ironist entertains the possible truth of religions, philosophies, therapies, and the endless flow of prescriptions for self-help but makes no claims to constructing some coherent whole from this mix. Conditions of postmodernity present those who are receptive with an overwhelming variety of possible truths, and listening to all possible truths without proclaiming the primacy of any is an adaptive theodicy for such conditions. The ironist has seen too much to embrace a single narrative and is therefore hesitant to construct one of his or her own.

A result of this uncertainty and reluctance to impose a single nomos is that the social construction of a meaningful order is left largely to the marketplace. Various forms of mass media draw on existing cultural themes and variations of these themes and tests them against public acceptance, with the difference between resonance and dissonance being the difference between success and failure. The postmodern human being, whether ironist or "commonsensical," contributes to meaning construction with his or her pocketbook. If we are willing to pay for the privilege of consuming a certain view of reality, that view will be promoted on the therapist's couch, on television, on talk radio, in the movies, at the bookstore, through the internet, and so on. Meaning is constructed in the marketplace with the immortality power of money accruing to those who can successfully resonate our collective, albeit amorphous, sense of truth.

Summary

It remains to be seen whether postmodernity is ultimately more than a brief interlude before some new era, but there is ample evidence that the grand narrative of the Enlightenment has come into question. One can discern a shift in the modern nomos at least as early as Kierkegaard's challenge to reason and Nietzsche's rejection of God. For the latter, humankind became its own justification and the creator of its own nomos through the theodicy of power. Camus, Husserl, and Heidegger continued the theme of the individually created nomos, while Foucault and then the deconstructionists shifted the emphasis from self-creation to social subversion. Lyotard heralded the collapse of the Enlightenment metanarrative and reiterated the argument that the individual provides his or her own legitimacy. For Baudrillard, all is simulacra, suggesting that we can simply simulate our own immortality. Rorty saw two very different adaptations to postmodern conditions, with those relying on "common sense" clinging to the verities of some earlier era, while the ironist is keeping his or her options open, questioning everything but rejecting nothing entirely.

A postmodern dilemma is then: how does an individual or group create an all-embracing fabric of meaning in the face of diversity? The option of reducing reality construction to the level of the individual may be a realistic response to prevailing conditions, but, if 100,000 years of human experience has anything to tell us, we should not expect 6 billion disconnected narratives to provide much comfort against psychic annihilation. We need look no farther than the persistence of traditional religions, the proliferation

of new age religions, the resurgence of fundamentalism, the vitality of traditional science, the renewed interest in community, and the unending search for philosophical common ground to realize that few of us are innately inclined to confront the Grim Reaper alone armed with nothing but our own imaginations. Nor are many people likely to embrace the nihilistic view that all is senseless. The diversity of human experience has impacted the search, but the search has not been given up. There may exist no grand narrative, but the search for common understanding of the human condition continues, and any such common understanding is in the final analysis a defense against a meaningless existence.

CONCLUSION

From Primitive to Postmodern

In the past 10,000 to 12,000 years, the human animal has been forced to adapt to accelerating social changes after at least 100,000 years and perhaps a million years of relatively stable conditions, and this adaptation has demanded ever more creative responses to self-awareness. During the long period of tribalism, humans adjusted to their awareness of the unknowable emptiness of space and time by socially creating an all-encompassing fabric of meaning, a nomos, transcending the individual and placing him or her within its protective boundaries. The individual, the tribe, nature, and the cosmos were all linked in one grand explanatory narrative. Anthropologists may debate the relative physical hardship of the life of our ancestors, but we may safely assume that 100,000 years or more was ample time for hunters/gatherers to construct, through trial and error, an all-embracing, harmonious, and meaningful order as a defense against the fear of chaos and insignificance.

The domestication of plants and animals with accompanying population growth and changes in social organization demanded new explanations of life's meaning. The pace of change and variety of experience increased, disturbing ancient harmonies and challenging long-held beliefs about the nature of reality. With the rise of civilization, the nomos was objectified in the form of deities or sacred ideals, allowing the unity of disparate groups (i.e., those not blood-related) under a single "sacred canopy" and restoring a degree of confidence to a creature that is aware it is living at the edge of chaos.

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However, this adaptation was unable to fully satisfy the desire of the human animal for harmony between its nomos and reality, given that social reality continued to change apace, and thus began the process of continuous alteration and adaptation of the nomoi experienced to the present.

For the next 1,500 years the disharmonies between beliefs and experience only increased as populations grew and became ever more concentrated in urban centers. The dissonance between nomos and reality prompted an expansion of the search for truth and meaning—for a new explanation that would make sense of the world as it was being experienced—and the nomos that ultimately evolved from this tension was a metaphor: that the cosmos operated like an enormous machine. Order was presupposed and empirical science became the theodicy, which was the tool for understanding that order and discerning truth.

Predictably, like theism and philosophy before it, science and reason failed to fully satisfy the desire for meaning, so the search continues. Many hold to traditional religious or philosophical narratives, others experiment with new variations on traditional stories, and still others seek a return to primitive tribalism. The ironist, dissatisfied with science, neither fully embraces nor totally rejects any of these alternatives and seeks instead to create his or her own meaningful order, keeping the options open. Unwilling to deny his or her own reality and unable to embrace chaos, the ironist remains open to the steady flow of possible narratives or nomoi streaming daily through postmodern culture, and from these he or she is free to construct meaning from whatever material life directs his or her way. Aware of the disharmony between one's own experience and traditional nomoi, the ironist is reluctant to endorse any truth, but nihilism is an unattractive alternative, for, as

Becker (1975:4) argued, meaninglessness and chaos are difficult to embrace. Instead, the

ironist remains flexible and is ready to respond to any eventuality. In this posture, the

situation of postmodern humankind parallels that of the biological organism poised to

adapt to a potentially chaotic environment. Ian Stewart (1992:61) described this biological

adaptation in the following analogy:

> Perhaps chaos and complexity are so common because they bestow advantages on
> the things that contain them. Chaotic systems can respond to an outside stimulus
> far more rapidly than nonchaotic ones can. To understand why, think of tennis
> players waiting to receive a serve. Do they stand still? Do they move like a pendu-
> lum from side to side? Of course not. They dance erratically from one foot to the
> other. In part they are trying to confuse their opponents, but they are also getting
> ready to respond to any serve that is sent their way. In order to move quickly in
> any particular direction, they make tiny movements in all directions at once.

Like the biological organism, the psychosocial organism might also garner some

adaptive advantage from an internal capacity to respond to external chaos, and, given the

social nature of the human animal, this same evolutionary advantage might well have

extended to the tribe. Perhaps the first nomoi were like earthquake-proof buildings, which

are anchored firmly but not rigidly, ready to bend without breaking, and poised to move in

any direction by moving "in all directions at once" (Stewart 1992:61). On the other hand,

the nomoi with which the human animal has experimented in his recent past (i.e., the last

10,000 years) are more rigid constructions and less able to accommodate changing reality

because they have had less time for trial and error. Continuing the tennis metaphor, many

of these nomoi projected the exact speed and trajectory of the serve and dictated accord-

ingly *the* proper method of return, only to find their projections incorrect. Indeed, the

history of social constructions, at least since the rise of civilization, has been one of

continuous tension and interplay between the drive to impose a meaningful order on reality

and the obvious disorder that persistently and undeniably rears its annoying head. Given

the homogeneity and constancy of primitive experience, their nomoi would have evolved

in such a manner as to accommodate this conflict, and the staying power of later nomoi is

in part a function of the degree to which they are able to manage this same tension.

The ironist is a product of the tension between the prevailing nomoi and lived

experience but differs from the primitive tribesman, the civilized citizen, and the secular

scientist in that he or she is more nearly alone in seeking a link to the cosmos. Conse-

quently, he or she may take little comfort in shared beliefs and communal identity and

must employ some other theodicy, one that requires no collective agreement. It is irony

that links the sovereignty-seeking individual to the cosmos in the absence of a fabric of

shared meaning.

Irony was identified as a literary phenomenon 200 years ago, but in the last half

century it has assumed a prominent place in philosophy and hence in the construction of

social reality. Still, those earlier descriptions capture very well the essence of the contem-

porary postmodern variety, as does this further elaboration from Steiner ([1914]

1973:148) on the "romantic ironists":

> The mood of a spirit that is aware of his sovereignty over things is called by the
> romanticists, the ironical mood of spirit. Karl Wilhelm Ferdinand Solger (1780-
> 1819) gave the following explanation of the term "romantic irony": The spirit of
> the artist must comprise all directions in one sweeping glance and this glance, hov-
> ering above everything, looking down on everything and annihilating it, we call
> "irony." Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829)...states concerning this mood of irony that
> it takes everything in at a glance and rises infinitely above everything that is lim-
> ited....Whoever lives in this mood feels bound by nothing; nothing determines the
> direction of his activity for him. He can "at his own pleasure tune himself to be ei-
> ther philosophical or philological, critical or poetical, historical or rhetorical, an-
> tique or modern." The ironical spirit rises above the eternal moral world order, for
> this spirit is not told what to do by anything except by himself. The ironist is to do
> what he pleases, for his morality can only be an esthetic morality.

The ironist is ready for any eventuality, for any serve, or for "whatever." The metanarratives have dictated the optimal position for returning serve, but for the ironists each grand narrative has been wanting. They simply have not accommodated the many bounces and spins of their life experience. Yet, ironists are not atheists or a nihilists; they have not thrown down the racket and left the court but have instead become their own sovereign source of wisdom regarding the return of serve. It is no surprise that the ironist continues a long tradition of marginalized social critics. Many of those who have challenged grand narratives have been people caught up in social upheaval and were marginal to the centers of social power, for example, Moses, Christ, Socrates, Nietzsche, Camus, Foucault, and Derrida, to name but a few. One must strain to accept a narrative that gives no immortality power, and there are always some who refuse to make that strain.

Such self-sovereignty, however, is not without its difficulties. As Bauman (1997:3) observed:

> You gain something, you lose something else in exchange: the old rule holds as true today as it was then [in conditions of modernity]. Only the gains and losses have changed places: *postmodern men and women exchanged a portion of their possibilities of security for a portion of happiness*. The discontents of modernity arose from a kind of security which tolerated too little freedom in the pursuit of individual happiness. The discontents of postmodernity arise from a kind of freedom of pleasure-seeking which tolerates too little individual security.

The human animal is a complex creature containing conflicting and contradictory impulses; on the one hand he or she is a social being whose very existence depends on other humans, but that same dependence can at times interfere with survival. Our stories reflect this conflict, sometimes favoring one and sometimes the other. Postmodernism reflects the extreme swing of the pendulum in favor of individual autonomy, while various otherwise disparate strategies–fundamentalism, communitarianism, and tribalism –reflect pressures

to move back in the other direction. In either case, the postmodern woman or man is faced

with an individual choice regarding meaning and, in this regard, is very different from any

of her or his ancestors. As Anderson (1990:112) noted,

> Many choices can be made, but they are all choices. And–this may be the hardest
> lesson of all for protectors of 'indigenous peoples' to learn–you do not choose to
> be natural. You do not choose to be premodern. If you choose, you are at least
> modern. If you know you are choosing, you are postmodern.

While this thesis is about ideas, no discussion of the postmodern condition seems

complete without at least some acknowledgment of the power of money. It may well be

that, in the absence of common and plausible vocabularies, money has survived as the

single most potent defense against personal oblivion. At least as early as the thirteenth

century, Aquinas rated money second only to God in its power and ubiquity (Crosby

1997:69). More recently, according to Becker (1975:76), money is a religion: "Oscar

Wilde observed that 'religions die when one points out their truth. Science is the history of

dead religions.' From this point of view, the religion of money has resisted the revelation

of its truth; it has not given itself over to science because it has not wanted to die." Money

has been the one constant source of immortality power since the rise of civilization. Again

as per Crosby (1997:69), in the Middle Ages "Money was second only to God in its power

and ubiquity," which was a reality not unnoticed by St. Thomas Aquinas. "Underneath the

different historical forms of immortality striving has been the lifeblood of money" (Becker

1975: 84). "The thing that connects money with the domain of the sacred is *power*, [and]

all power is in essence power to deny mortality" (81). Other mortality defenses are

available to postmodern humankind–religion, philosophy, science–but money is the only

thing held in common and the only postmodern universal defense against death and chaos.

> No wonder economic equality is beyond the endurance of modern democratic man:
> the house, the car, the bank balance are his immortality symbols...modern man

cannot endure economic equality because he has no faith in self-transcendent, otherworldly immortality symbols; visible physical worth is the only thing he has to give him eternal life. No wonder that people segregate themselves with such consuming dedication, that specialness is so much a fight to the death: man lashes out all the harder when he is cornered, when he is a pathetically impoverished immortality seeker. He dies when his little symbols of specialness die. (85)

If Becker's observations are true of modern humankind, what do they suggest about the postmodern condition? It would certainly appear that self-transcendent, *otherworldly* immortality symbols have not decreased in the last 25 years. If any change has occurred in this area, there has been a proliferation of immortality symbols available in the marketplace. There are continuous new opportunities to purchase symbols of protection from meaninglessness and chaos–from missile defenses to designer jeans–and the divide between the earthly and the otherworldly is increasingly blurred. Various New Age products and services are introduced steadily, religious institutions continue to amass wealth, and the Federal Reserve is treated with almost religious deference. With money as the medium of transcendence, the possibilities are limited only by the human imagination, and, whether through cryopreservation, cloning, or possibilities yet to be imagined, opportunities will likely continue to flood the marketplace.

Final Comments

Whether or not postmodernity exists as a new stage of evolution, the societal characteristics gathered under that rubric are real. It is possible today for people in the developed world to have some superficial knowledge of the life and experiences of practically anyone else on the planet. One may also know something of their traditions and their stories and of the various devices they have used to make sense of life and fend off chaos. At the same time, as social creatures aware of our own ultimate demise we are

predisposed to collectively constructing a shared order of meaning as a defense against oblivion. We continue to seek comfort against death in the company of like-minded people. As Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor told Christ: "This craving for a *community* of worship is the chief torment of every man individually and of all humanity from the beginning of time." People want to be told what to believe and they want everyone believing the same thing (Anderson 1990:219).

For some 10,000 years, since the diminution of tribal culture, humankind has experimented with various solutions to creating a shared order in ever more complex societies, which is a task that has grown increasingly difficult. Given this relatively short span of time, it is very unlikely that the drive to construct some shared meaning has evolved to something more consistent with current circumstances, that is, we are still influenced by those earliest practices of meaning construction. When Kempton responded mindlessly to his fallen comrade, he was driven by something innately human and something firmly established long before the appearance of civilizations and the armies of strangers amassed in their defense. Beliefs about immortality are contained in our worldview, and we will at times pay any price to perpetuate that view. Today, the human animal is faced with new demands on the maintenance of any worldview but continues to work with old tools. Traditionalists (i.e., fundamentalists of all stripes, "the commonsensical," as Rorty calls them) tend to hammer away with these old tools as if the new demands are an illusion or a temporary abomination. Ironists, on the other hand, are eager to experiment with new tools but skirt the innate drive for shared meaning. Perhaps some new Hegelian synthesis will arise from the tension between these two extremes, but most likely we will be forced to create some new order that honors both the need to belong to something

larger than self and the multitude of differences among those many selves. As Rorty

suggested, we must develop the imaginative ability to see strangers as "fellow sufferers"

(Smart 1993: 106). Bauman (1990:232) echoed Rorty when he said,

> The great service sociology is well prepared to render to human life and human
> cohabitation is the promotion of mutual understanding and tolerance as a para-
> mount condition of shared freedom. Sociological thinking cannot but promote the
> understanding that breeds tolerance and the tolerance that makes understanding
> possible. In the words of the American philosopher Richard Rorty, "if we take care
> of freedom, truth and goodness will take care of themselves." Sociological think-
> ing helps the cause of freedom.

It seems that no matter how much postmodern conditions might mitigate against

them, adherence to some universal principles (e.g., mutual understanding, tolerance, and

freedom) is necessary to avoid chaos and confusion. Some unifying "truth" seems essential

for any nomos that has a chance of avoiding accelerating conflict. The current popularity

of relativism obviously sounds to many people of the world like an invitation to chaos. As

a defense against meaninglessness, it is too nebulous and creates a "meaning vacuum"

which the earlier nomoi of tribalism, nationalism, and various fundamentalisms rush to fill.

If Becker (1975) and Lifton (1979) are correct (and given the perpetual conflicts around

the world it would seem that they are), we are all too willing to scapegoat a mortal enemy

to ensure our own immortality. *Homo sapiens* of differing worldviews must have the

capacity to embrace their commonalties while respecting their differences. That is, cultural

relativism is essential to peaceful coexistence, but, unless it is accompanied by such

absolute truths as respect for freedom and the dignity of others, it is unlikely to provide

much comfort against the chaos still lurking at the perimeter of the village. Only when we

can sustain the ability to see ourselves in others and others in ourselves, an ability that is

likely a part of our genetic make-up, will we be able to stretch the protective canopy over

everyone.

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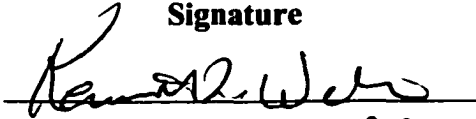## DISSERTATION APPROVAL FORM
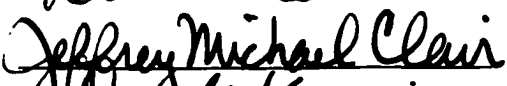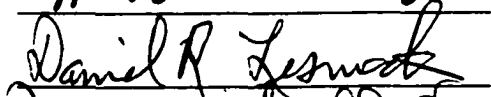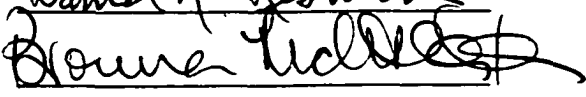## DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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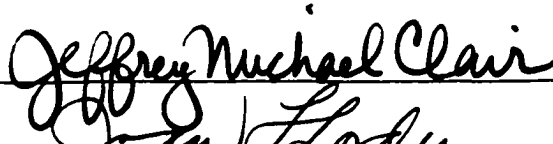**Graduate Program** Medical Sociology

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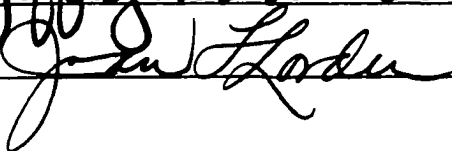
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