The questions, "What is the purpose of living?" and "Why do I exist?" haunt modern Western civilization and the absence of an adequate answer to them has given rise to the "illness" of meaninglessness or anomie. Psychiatrists, themselves, are afflicted with this same illness, partly because the problem of the meaning of life is solved by a special type of perception rather than by logic - psychiatry is trapped by its commitment to rationalism.

Sufism, on the other hand, is a tradition devoted to the development of the higher intuitive capacity needed to deal with this issue. By taking advantage of the special science of the Sufis, Western civilization may be able to extricate itself from its dilemma and contribute to the development of man's full capacities.

"I think it not improbable that man, like the grub that prepares a chamber for the winged thing it never has seen but is to be - that man, may have cosmic destinies that he does not understand."

-Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes (3, p. vi)

Psychiatry can be defined as the science of reducing mental suffering and enhancing mental health. To date, the field has been primarily concerned with the first part of the definition. For example, in the Index to the Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (19), the word "neurosis" has over 400 references. In contrast, "health" is not even listed. The imbalance tends to be true of contemporary texts as well. This situation is understandable because psychiatry originated to deal with disordered function. The question, "What is the function of a healthy person?" which requires the further question "What is the purpose of human life?" is not usually asked because it is assumed to be answered by simple observation of the everyday activities of the general population (18, p. 122).

Underlying all of our activities are purposes that give meaning and direction to our efforts. One might go to college to become a lawyer, or save money to buy a car, or vote to elect an official; all of these actions are vitalized by purpose and if the purpose is removed, the activities may cease. That being the case, what is the purpose of human life, itself? What answer do we have to the question, "Why am I?" A direct answer is not usually attempted in our culture but an indirect answer is there, implicit in scientific publication and in the world view that permeates from scientific authority to the public-at-large. We are told either that the question lies outside the scope of science or that the question is false because the human race has developed by chance in a random universe. Erwin Schrodinger, the physicist, commented on this problem:

"Most painful is the absolute silence of all our scientific investigations towards our questions concerning the meaning and scope of the whole display. The more attentively we watch it, the more aimless and foolish it appears to be. The show that is going on obviously acquires a meaning only with regard to the mind that contemplates it. But what science tells us about this relationship is patently absurd: as if the mind had only been produced by that very display that it is now watching and would pass away with it when the
sun finally cools down and the earth has been turned into a desert of fire and snow (9, p.149).

We pay a price for the 'nonanswer' of science. Psychiatry has recognized the existence of "anomie" - an "illness" of meaninglessness, of alienation or estrangement from one's fellow men. Anomie stems from the absence of a deeply felt purpose. Our contemporary scientific culture also has had little to say about meaning, itself, except to suggest and assume that man imposes meaning; he does not discover it. That this assumption may be incorrect and productive of pathology is a possibility that needs to be considered. It may be that the greatest problem confronting psychiatry is that it lacks a theoretical framework adequate to provide meaning for its patients, many of whom are badly handicapped in their struggle to overcome neurotic problems because the conceptual context within which they view themselves provides neither meaning, direction, nor hope. That context derives from the modern, scientific world view of an orderly, mechanical, indifferent universe in which human beings exist as an interesting biochemical phenomenon - barren of purpose. Survival is a purpose, but not enough. Working for the survival of others and to alleviate suffering is a purpose but it loses its meaning against a picture of the human race with no place to go, endlessly repeating the same patterns, or worse.

The issue of meaning increases in importance as one's own death becomes less theoretical and more probable. Life goals of acquisition become utterly futile, for no achievements of money, fame, sex, power, and security are able to stop the relentless slide towards extinction. Our bodies age and our minds grow increasingly restless seeking a solution to death. As former goals lose their significance, life can easily appear to be a random cycle of trivial events and the search may end in the most profound despair or a dull resignation. The widespread use of sedatives, alcohol, and narcotics is related to the wish to suppress despair and substitute sensation for meaning.

Such "existential" despair is so culturally accepted that it is often defined as healthy. Consider the following extract from The American Handbook of Psychiatry:

"To those who have obtained some wisdom in the process of reaching old age, death often assumes meaning as the proper outcome of life. It is nature's way of assuring much life and constant renewal. Time and customs change but the elderly tire of changing; it is time for others to take over, and the elderly person is willing to pass quietly from the scene" (5, p.251).

So we should end, according to the voice of reason, neither with a bang nor a whimper, but in a coma of increasing psychological fatigue.

The problem is illustrated concretely and poignantly by the dilemma of many psychiatrists themselves. A recent article in the American Journal of Psychiatry concerned a number of professional therapists, ages 35 to 45, mostly of a psychoanalytic background, who formed a group which at first provided peer supervision and later attempted to function as a leaderless therapy group for its members who, as it turned out, were in a crisis:
The original members of the group we have described were remarkably homogeneous in their purposes in joining. The conscious reason was to obtain help in mastering a phase in their own development, the mid-life crisis. We refer to that stage of life in which the individual is aware that half of his time has been used up and the general pattern or trajectory of his work and personal life is clear. At this time, one must give up the normal manic defenses of early life - infinite faith in one's abilities and the belief that anything is possible. The future becomes finite, childhood fantasies have been fulfilled or unrealized, and there is no longer a sense of having enough time for anything. One becomes aware that one's energy and physical and mental abilities will be declining. The individual must think of prolonging and conserving rather than expanding. The reality of one's limited life span comes into sharp focus, and the work of mourning the passing of life begins in earnest (4, p.1166).

The "healthy" attitude recommended here would seem to be a stoical and courageous facing of a reality defined by certain assumptions prevalent in our culture: limited human capacity and limited meaning to life. From this point of view, it can be maintained that the second half of life should be used to adjust oneself to the final termination of individual consciousness. The grimness of such a goal may have resonated in the authors' minds for they go on to brighten up the picture.

"In Erikson's terms, the individual must at this time struggle to achieve intimacy and creativity and avoid isolation and stagnation. If the work of mourning one's lost youth is carried through and the realities of the human situation are fully accepted, the ensuing years can be a period of increased productivity and gratification" (4, p.1166).

"Increased productivity" and "gratification" are invoked to suggest that something good is still possible after 40, but the possibilities still would seem to call more for resignation than for vitality and continued growth. This ultimately circumscribed view of human life is widely held by psychiatrists. Even in the relatively affirmative writings of Erikson the Eight Stages of Man have some of the flavor of a survival manual (1).

In contrast to our scientific culture and its psychology, Eastern introspective (mystical) disciplines have focused on meaning and purpose but have employed a strategy in which the use of intellect and reason is neither central nor basic to the process of investigation. Procedures such as meditation, fasting, chanting and other unusual practices have been employed as part of an integrated strata whose exact pattern and content depended on the nature and circumstances of the individual and of the culture in which the teaching was taking place.

Unfortunately, the literature of Eastern psychological disciplines has not been much practical use for contemporary Western readers. Academic study of such texts does not seem to develop wisdom or improve personality functioning, and exotic practices themselves have proven to be elusive and tricky instruments. For example, procedures such as meditation that were once part of a unique and individually prescribed pattern of development are now extracted from their original context and offered for consumption as if they were a kind of vitamin that was good for everyone, ridiculously cheap, and devoid of side effects. Those who use these components of a specialized technology may obtain
increased calmness, enjoyment, and improvement of efficiency - but without noticeable gain in wisdom. They answer the question, "Who am I?" by reciting dogma, not by realization, and for all of the "bliss" that may be displayed, the person's essential knowledge appears unchanged. For those who fare less well meditation, schizoid withdrawal, grandiosity, vanity, and dependency flourish under the disguise of spiritual practice. Perhaps the worst effect of indiscriminate and unintegrated use of these techniques is that people come to believe that the effects they experience are the measure of Eastern esoteric science. The end result is that they confirm and strengthen their customary conceptual prison from which they desperately need to escape.

The crux of the problem is that modern Westerners need technical means specific to their time and culture. Although such a statement makes perfect sense to most people when the subject concerns the training of physicians or physicists, training in the "spiritual" is believed to be a different matter. Programs and techniques 2000 years old are assumed to be adequate to the task: indeed, it seems that that the older and more alien they are, the better they are received.

Fortunately, some traditional materials have recently been made available in a form suitable for contemporary needs; they offer practical benefits of interest to psychiatry as well as the general public. These materials address themselves to the question, "Who am I?" but they do so in a unique manner:

Why We Are Here

"Walking one evening along a deserted road, Mulla Nasrudin saw a troop of horsemen coming towards him.

His imagination started to work; he saw himself captured and sold as a slave, or impressed into the army.

Nasrudin bolted, climbed a wall into a graveyard, and lay down in an open tomb.

Puzzled at his strange behavior, the men - honest travelers - followed him.

They found him stretched out, tense and quivering.

'What are you doing in that grave? We saw you run away. Can we help you?'

'Just because you can ask a question does not mean there is a straightforward answer to it,' said the Mulla, who now realized what had happened. 'It all depends upon your viewpoint. If you must know, however: I am here because of you, and you are here because of me" (11, p. 16).

"Why We Are Here" is a teaching story adapted from the classical literature of Sufism. Teaching stories, in a form appropriate to the modern reader, are the means now being made available to prepare Western intellects for learning what they need to know. The stories, such as "Why We Are Here," are built of patterns, depth upon depth, offering
resonance at the reader's level, whatever that may be. Teaching stories have more than one function. They provide the means for people to become aware of their patterns of behavior and thinking so as to accomplish a refinement of their perception and the development of an attitude conducive to learning. Some stories are also designed to communicate with what is conceived to be the innermost part of the human being.

Speaking metaphorically, Sufis say the stories make contact with a nascent "organ" of superior perception, supplying a type of "nutrition" that assists its development. It is this latter function that is of particular importance to understand; it is the key to the possible role of Sufism in helping to diagnose and cure, eventually, the basic illness that afflicts psychiatrists as well as their patients.

Sufism is usually thought of as a Middle Eastern mystical religion. According to Idries Shah, that description is misleading. Referring to copious Sufi classics, he states that Sufism is the method of developing the higher perceptual capacity inherent in human beings and vital to their happiness.

This method is referred to by classical Sufi authorities as a "science" in the sense that it is a specific body of knowledge, applied according to the principles known by a Teacher, to achieve a specific and predictable result. That result is the capacity to know, directly (not through the senses or the usual intellectual functions) the meaning of human life and the inner significance of ordinary events. The change in consciousness that results is regarded as the next step in the evolution of the human race, a step that we must take or perish.

Ordinarily, we do not consider that the zone of normal perception may be so limited as to preclude the experience of a significant dimension of reality, the one with which mystical disciplines were ordinarily concerned. According to the Sufis, meaning is just such a perceptual problem.

An illustration of this issue at the level of biology has been described by C. F. Pantin, former Chairman of Trustees of the British Museum:

"A danger in this sort of behavior analysis - one which I fell into myself - is that it looks so complete that if you are not careful, you may start to imagine that you can explain the whole behavior of the sea anemone by very simple reflexes - like the effect of a coin in a slot machine. But quite by accident, I discovered that apart from reflexes, there was a whole mass of purposive behavior connected with the spontaneous activity of the anemone about which we simply know nothing. (Actually, this behavior was too slow to be noticed; it was outside our sensory spectrum for the time being)" (2, p.80).

Similarly, the purpose of human life may be outside the perceptual spectrum of the ordinary person. To widen that spectrum, to provide "sight," is the goal of Sufism.

The Sufis claim that mankind is psychologically "ill" because people do not perceive who they really are and what their situation is. Thus, they are "blind" or "asleep" because their latent, higher capacity is underdeveloped - partly because they are too caught up in the
exercise of their lesser capacities for purposes of vanity, greed and fear. The development of the necessary perception itself is called "awakening" and the perception, itself, is called "Knowledge." It is often said that the science of awakening mankind has been present for many thousands of years but, because of the special nature of the process and of the Knowledge that it brings, the dissemination of the science has fluctuated throughout history and has never taken place on a large scale, partly because of the resistance this idea provokes (14, p.18).

Radios

“I was once in a certain country where the local people had never heard the sounds emitted from a radio receiver. A transistorized set was being brought to me; and while waiting for it to arrive I tried to describe it to them. The general effect was that the description fascinated some and infuriated others. A minority became irrationally hostile about radios.

When I finally demonstrated the set, the people could not tell the difference between the voice from the loudspeaker and someone nearby. Finally, like us, they managed to develop the necessary discrimination of each, such as we have.

And, when I questioned them afterwards, all swore that what they had imagined from descriptions of radios, however painstaking, did not correspond with the reality” (12, pp. 13-15).

If, instead of talking of a radio receiver, the term "intuition" is used, the meaning of the analogy might be more clear. Ordinary intuition, however, is considered by the Sufis to be a lower level imitation of the superior form of intuition with which Sufism is concerned. For the moment, however, some consideration of the place of ordinary intuition in the activity of the scientist may be helpful in illustrating the practical reality of the Sufic position.

Although the scientific method is taught as if data plus logic equal discovery, those who have studied how discoveries are actually made come to quite different conclusions. Wigner, a Nobel prize-winning physicist comments:

"The discovery of the laws of nature requires first and foremost intuition, conceiving pictures and a great many subconscious processes. The use and also the confirmation of these laws is another matter . . . logic comes after intuition" (2, p. 45).

An extensive, detailed study of the process of scientific discovery was made by Polanyi, formerly Professor of Physics Chemistry at the University of Manchester and then Senior Research Fellow at Merton College, Oxford (2). Polanyi studied scientists' descriptions of how the arrived at their "breakthroughs" to a new view of reality. He found, like Wigner, that logic, data, and reasoning came last - another channel of knowing was in use. There was no word for that channel in ordinary vocabulary so he used an analogy to convey its nature:

"And we know that the scientist produces problems, has hunches, and elated by these anticipations, pursues the quest that should fulfill these anticipations. This quest is guided
throughout by feelings of a deepening coherence and these feelings have a fair chance of proving right. We may recognize here the powers of a dynamic intuition. The mechanism of this power can be illuminated by an analogy. Physics speak of potential energy that is released when a weight slides down a slope. Our search for deeper coherence is guided by a potentiality. We feel the slope toward deeper insight as we feel the direction in which a heavy weight is pulled along a steep incline. It is this dynamic intuition which guides the pursuit of discovery" (2, p.60).

Not only do the Sufis contend that man needs more than intellect and emotion to guide him, but that those two "servants, in the absence of the "master", have taken over the house and forgotten their proper function:

The Servants and The House

"At one time there was a wise and kindly man, who owned a large house. In the course of his life he often had to go away for long periods. When he did this, he left the house in charge of his servants.

One of the characteristics of these people was that they were very forgetful. They forgot, from time to time, why they were in the house; so they carried out their tasks repetitiously. At other times they thought that they should be doing things in a different way from the way in which their duties had been assigned to them. This was because they had lost track of their functions.

Once, when the master was away far a long time, a new generation of servants arose, who thought that they actually owned the house. Since they were limited by their immediate world, however, they thought that they were in a paradoxical situation. For instance, sometimes they wanted to sell the house, and could find no buyers, because they did not know how to go about it. At other times, people came inquiring about buying the house and asking to see the title-deeds, but since they did not know anything about deeds the servants thought that these people were mad and not genuine buyers at all.

Paradox was also evidenced by the fact that supplies for the house kept 'mysteriously' appearing, and this provision did not fit in with the assumption that the inmates were responsible for the whole house.

Instructions for running the house had been left, for purposes of refreshing the memory, in the master's apartments. But after the first generation, so sacrosanct had these apartments become that nobody was allowed to enter them, and they became considered to be an impenetrable mystery. Some, indeed, held that there was no such apartment at all, although they could see its doors. These doors, however, they explained as something else: a part of the decoration of the walls.

Such was the condition of the staff of a house, which neither took over the house nor stayed faithful to their original commitment" (15, pp. 211-212).
The Sufis specify that the development of man's superior capacity has its own rigorous requirements: adequate preparation of suitable students, the correct learning situation, and the activity of a Teacher - one who has reached the goal and by means of that special knowledge is equipped to teach according to the needs of the particular culture, the particular time, historical period, and the particular person. Because of these requirements, there is no set dogma or technique that is utilized in a standard fashion: the form is only a vehicle and is constantly changing.

"All religious presentations are varieties of one truth, more or less distorted. This truth manifests itself in various peoples, who become jealous of it, not realizing that its manifestation accords with their needs. It cannot be passed on in the same form because of the difference in the minds of different communities. It cannot be reinterpreted, because it must grow afresh" (17, p.264).

However in almost all organizations we can see examples where the attachment to form and dogma, results in them becoming stiffened and ossified. For example if we take the field of psychiatry, itself, in Freud's time, the Vienna Circle was open to all who had sufficient interest and capacity to participate, regardless of what formal degrees or titles they possessed. Today, the American Psychoanalytic Institute will not accord full membership to anyone not possessing an M.D., even though the functional relevance of a medical degree for the theory and practice of psychoanalysis can scarcely be discerned.

Footnotes

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ii In fairness to Freud it should be noted that in his later philosophical writings, he did consider that question and when he did his answer was more in keeping with mystical literature than with modern psychology. "I may now add that civilization is the process in the service of Eros, whose purpose is to combine single human individuals, and after that families, then races, peoples and nations, into one great unity, the unity of mankind" (18, p. 122).

iii Idries Shah has written many books on Sufism.

Bibliography


