

Foreword

A Dedication to C. West Churchman

It is appropriate that this volume is dedicated in the memory of C. West Churchman who passed away March 21, 2004. He spent his adult life pursuing the questions the present authors raise. His concern for wisdom and knowledge is part of a pragmatic tradition stemming back to William James. James observed that the world we live in and in which we must make our way is enormously complex, nuanced, varied, and continuously changing. In more modern words, our universe is indeterminate, interactive, and interrelated. Alfred North Whitehead, who took his inspiration from James, sums it up: reality itself is ultimately a dynamic process.

Whitehead observed that James discovered a “great truth” when he argued that every finite set of premises is based on notions that are beyond our direct purview. James concluded that morality was an essential component of the universe but that it could not be reduced to simple notions such as “the good” and “the right.” Reality for him was just too all encompassing. Those of us who make decisions and act in this world live in a restless uncertain world in which we are forced to make assumptions and then act on them. Consequently, we must have a “will to believe.”

Coping with a restless world requires a restless system for creating knowledge and understanding. Edgar A. Singer, one of James’s last and most prized students at Harvard, took on as his life’s project the development of an epistemology adequate for dealing with the world to which James introduced him. Churchman, whose intellectual thrusts probed deeply into logic and statistics under the tutorage of the renowned logician, Henry Bradford Smith, was captivated by Singer’s project. As a student and then a colleague of Singer’s at the University of Pennsylvania, he realized that in order to secure improvement in the human condition—a lifelong quest for Churchman—James’s worldview and Singer’s methodological approach offered the best possibility of success. *The Design of Inquiring Systems* is the culmination of his efforts to bring the project to fruition. The authors of this book seek to push the project further.

The two of us had the rare opportunity and privilege of studying with West as he was embarking on *The Design of Inquiring Systems*. Weekly we met in his sixth floor Barrows Hall office on the U.C. Berkeley campus. The view from his study stretched across the often foggy San Francisco Bay to the Golden Gate and beyond. This served as a background metaphor for the universe as we discussed—nay, actively debated—the works of the great philosophers whose ideas were the grist for his evolving mill of inquiry. Our challenge was clear. We were not pursuing the academic philosophical question “What did the thinker actually say and mean?” Rather, we were probing the texts asking “What insights and guidance can we glean from each thinker’s ideas for contemporary inquiry systems?” Churchman’s hope was that later inquirers would continue to ask this question and use their answers to develop practical systems, systems that produce wisdom and knowledge for solving society’s pressing yet ever changing problems. The present authors are responding to that call.

The papers in this volume are a welcome addition to the literature on information systems. Indeed, they are a radical departure from the vast majority of previous efforts.

They are especially welcome because they take up the challenge of designing systems that are founded on different underlying modes of inquiry, Singerian and Churchmanian Inquiry Systems.

To say that Singerian and Churchmanian systems are underrepresented is putting it kindly. They are virtually nonexistent.

Singer and Churchman are concerned primarily with wisdom, not information. Now, it is certainly not the case that Singer and Churchman have a monopoly on truth or wisdom. Far from it. Rather, they have an important take—a profound insight—on them.

Most inquiries whether in science, the humanities, or everyday life start with certain givens, that is, fundamental taken-for-granted assumptions. These assumptions generally rest in the background where they rarely are raised up to the surface and challenged. In principle, every problem solver starts with the same accepted set of givens.

In contrast, Singer and Churchman are interested in the role of assumptions in the formulation of complex problems. In complex problems, different stakeholders almost never formulate the same issue in the same way. In a word, different stakeholders start with different takens, that is, fundamentally different assumptions about the nature of the world. We do not begin complex inquiries with the same starting, or even ending, assumptions.

Singer and Churchman point out that our background assumptions function as moral imperatives. In effect, different disciplines argue, “If you want to be a good member in standing of our club, then you *ought* to look at the world in the ways that we do.” While not ordinarily regarded as moral injunctions, they are nonetheless. Just ask those who challenge or violate a profession’s or a discipline’s ways of looking at the world.

We know of no information system currently in existence that regards our fundamental assumptions as moral takens. For this reason, we do not believe that at the present time we have anything even approaching a *true* information system, but the papers in this volume are a welcome start for they sense the problem even if the goal still eludes us.

Churchman ends his book with a question: “What kind of a world must it be in which inquiry becomes possible?” The question still stands, but readers of this book will be nudged a little closer to an answer.

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