Thinking Systematics

Critical-Dialectical Reasoning for a Perilous Age
and a Case for Socialism

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Preface

This book has one primary purpose: to enable human beings to substantially improve the ways they think and act in the world through a form of critical-dialectical reasoning called “Thinking Systematics” (TSS). The logical methods, problem-solving strategies and cognitive habits comprising TSS have many potential applications in our individual lives, including our work tasks, personal relationships, financial affairs, leisure activities and moral deliberations. The very earliest drafts of TSS, produced almost twenty years ago by Murray Smith, were designed and intended for use by organizations and institutions to improve the thinking and decision-making skills of their members (teachers, students, activists, workers, managers, administrators, etc.). That original goal was overtaken by events as Smith turned to other, more pressing research interests, in particular the turbulent era that opened with the financial crisis and Great Recession of 2008–09. TSS was relegated to the back burner, although its early (unpublished) iteration still found a place in the classroom and influenced more than a few students at Brock University over the years — including Tim Hayslip, co-author of this book.

The new iteration of TSS presented here is decidedly more ambitious both theoretically and practically than anything that came before it. This is by no means accidental, for the TSS project has undergone a transformation reflecting a much-changed reality: the deepening crisis and breakdown of what was euphemistically once called the “new world order.” The upshot is that TSS is now much less about individual personal development, or about empowering individuals to work (or compete) more effectively with others. Instead, its principal goal is to encourage and enable the discovery of objective truths about the current human condition and to revolutionize our individual and collective understandings of a larger world that most of us engage with far too passively.

In an era fraught with extraordinary perils, the urgent need for greatly improved thinking and intelligent action on the part of immense numbers of “ordinary people” should be only too obvious, not only as an end in itself but as a means to advancing the well-being and continued
progress of humanity. In pursuit of this “need in thinking,” we invite readers to take an intellectual journey with us — a journey into evolving modes of cognition and problem solving, into the histories of philosophy and social thought and into superior ways of investigating and seeking real solutions to the multiple crises of our time. At the individual level, the main reward for those taking this journey will be a deeper and more confident understanding of the twenty-first-century world — a prerequisite not only for preserving one’s sanity in an era characterized by pervasive irrationality but also living a more fulfilling, meaningful and morally worthy life.

Our method of presenting the TSS system, which involves a progression from simple abstract concepts to increasingly concrete and complexly determined ones, is closely intertwined with the book’s ambition to heighten awareness of the dynamics and sharpening real contradictions of the current human condition, while also suggesting some effective means to respond to them. To be sure, a comprehensive analysis of those contradictions and the totality they occupy is something that can only be remotely approximated in a single book. All the same, we are convinced that the general answers we give to many of the questions explored here are of utmost importance to such an analysis and can lead our readers toward new horizons of discovery, understanding and practical activity.

What we hope to demonstrate, above all, is the power of TSS methodology to reveal objective truths and reliable knowledge about a world that exists beyond the standpoints and subjectivities of human individuals but which is also in urgent need of more comprehensively rational activity on the part of collective humanity.

Along with three prologues, an introduction, an epilogue and an appendix, the book consists of three parts. Part One is devoted to a diagnosis of the current “need in thinking”; an exploration of the continuities and discontinuities between conventional (formal) logic and dialectics (the logic of a contradictory and ever-changing reality); an introduction to the key principles of TSS and its place in the history of dialectical thought; and an illustration of how TSS can be used to illuminate a major preoccupation of our time — the environmental crisis.

Part Two is focused on the theme of “Taking the Social Seriously.” A distinctive feature of TSS dialectical logic is the weight it gives to the category of “the social” in analyzing the human condition and its
relationship both to “the natural” and to what traditional philosophy called “the ideal,” a category that emerges dialectically from the complex interaction of the natural, the social and “consciousness.” Part Two includes chapters dealing with the history of Western philosophy and the emergence of modern social thought; some key problems pertaining to faith, reason and morality; and the place of “the ideal” in the development of dialectical thought. It culminates with a chapter on dialectical monism versus dualism, which reveals that TSS finds its highest expression in Marxism, understood not merely as a philosophy but as a practical project for transforming the world — a “scientific socialism.”

Part Three, entitled “Taking Socialism Seriously,” begins with a short chapter devoted to discussing dialectical materialism and the controversy surrounding this common descriptor of Marxist philosophy from the standpoint of TSS. This is followed by a lengthy final chapter that presents a case for Marxist socialism that is both deeply informed by TSS methodology and responsive to the leading arguments against socialism.

*Thinking Systematics* covers a great deal of ground but is structured to allow for a dialectical development of concepts and arguments accessible to a wide audience. From a pedagogical point of view, this has the advantage of urging the reader to ascend from simpler cognitive levels to progressively higher ones. In terms of intellectual complexity and difficulty, the peak is reached in Chapter 8 (“Dialectical Monism versus Dualism”), which in many ways constitutes a concentrated summary of the book’s main arguments. To ease the reader’s ascent we deliberately reiterate, as well as progressively refine, the definitions that we provide to several key concepts, especially the categories comprising the “TSS triad” — namely, the natural, the social and consciousness. This progression is most apparent across Chapters 3, 4 and 8. We trust that these repetitions will be helpful to the reader’s developing understanding.

Finally, the reading of this book can be approached in a number of ways. Each of the chapters can stand alone (to varying degrees), and this is also true for each of the three parts. Some readers may wish to skip the deeper dive into the history of philosophy and modern social theory featured in Part Two in favour of a quick transition from Part One’s exposition of the TSS system to the case for socialism presented in Part Three. Others, who may be less inclined to entertain our case for socialism, may elect to skip Part Three entirely. Our own view, of course, is that the *full* benefit and import of the book can only be appreciated by
reading it from cover to cover; but a more “selective” approach should still be a rewarding experience for most readers.

A Note on the Prologues

This book’s three prologues offer a series of entertaining observations, sobering arguments and vital facts that relate to many of the book's central themes and are intended to prepare the reader for what follows. Consisting of quotations from a wide range of thinkers, they have been numbered to permit their use as a unique in-text reference system that supplements the more standard in-text and endnote referencing systems employed in the book. For example, the insertion of “(P1.02)” into the text at the end of a sentence signals that quotation number 2 from Prologue 1 is relevant to a particular statement or argument that is being made there. It is, of course, up to the reader to decide whether to explore the connection or to simply carry on with the main text.
PROLOGUE ONE

On Human Thinking, Society and a Decaying Culture

On Human Thinking

P1.01. It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it. — Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 330 BCE

P1.02. [Many paradoxical experiences] seem bent on shaking our faith in the senses. But all to no purpose. Most of this illusion is due to the mental assumptions that we ourselves superimpose, so that things not perceived by the senses pass for perceptions. There is nothing harder than to separate the plain facts from the questionable interpretations promptly imposed upon them by the mind. — Lucretius, *On the Nature of the Universe*, 50 BCE

P1.03. If you set out to construct a building with a crooked ruler, a faulty square that is set a little out of the straight and a level ever so slightly askew, there can be only one outcome — a crazy, crooked, higgledy-piggledy huddle, sagging here and bulging there, with bits that look like falling at any moment and are all in fact destined to fall, doomed by the initial miscalculations on which the structure is based. Just as crooked and just as defective must be the structure of your reasoning if the senses on which it rests are themselves deceptive. — Lucretius, *On the Nature of the Universe*, 50 BCE

P1.04. The great majority of mankind are satisfied with appearances, as though they were realities, and are often more influenced by the things that seem than by those that are. — Nicolo Machiavelli, *Discourses*, circa 1513–17

P1.05. Men who are governed by reason … desire for themselves nothing which they do not also desire for the rest of mankind. — Benedict Spinoza, *Ethics*, 1677
P1.06. The human brain is a complex organ with the wonderful power of enabling man to find reasons for continuing to believe whatever it is that he wants to believe. — Voltaire

P1.07. It’s easier to fool people than to convince them that they have been fooled. — Mark Twain

P1.08. In religion and politics, people’s beliefs and convictions are in almost every case gotten at second-hand, and without examination, from authorities who have not themselves examined the questions at issue but have taken them at second-hand from other non-examiners, whose opinions about them were not worth a brass farthing. — Mark Twain, *Autobiography*, 1907

P1.09. One believes things because one has been conditioned to believe them. — Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*, 1932

P1.10. The highest activity a human being can attain is learning for understanding, because to understand is to be free. — Benedict Spinoza, *Ethics*, 1677

P1.11. The motto of Enlightenment is therefore: *Sapere aude*! Have courage to use your own understanding! Laziness and cowardice are the reasons why such a large proportion of men, even when nature has long emancipated them from alien guidance, nevertheless gladly remain immature for life. For the same reasons, it is all too easy for others to set themselves up as their guardians. It is so convenient to be immature! — Immanuel Kant, “What Is Enlightenment?” 1784

P1.12. No one can be a great thinker who does not recognize that as a thinker it is his first duty to follow his intellect to whatever conclusions it may lead … Not that it is solely or chiefly to form great thinkers that freedom of thinking is required. On the contrary, it is as much and even more indispensable to enable average human beings to attain the mental stature which they are capable of. — John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, 1863

P1.13. One of the first things I think young people, especially nowadays, should learn is how to see for yourself and listen for yourself and think for yourself … It’s good to keep wide-open ears and listen to what everybody has to say, but when you come to make a decision, you have to
weigh all of what you’ve heard on its own, and place it where it belongs, and come to a decision for yourself; you’ll never regret it. But if you form the habit of taking what someone else says about a thing without checking it out for yourself, you’ll find that other people will have you hating your friends and loving your enemies. — Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*, 1964

P1.14. It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends on his not understanding it. — Upton Sinclair

P1.15. It is worthy of remark that a belief constantly inculcated during the early years of life, whilst the brain is impressible, appears to acquire almost the nature of an instinct; and the very essence of an instinct is that it is followed independently of reason. — Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, 1871

P1.16. People do not like to think. If one thinks, one must reach conclusions; and conclusions are not always pleasant. They are a thorn in the spirit. But I consider it a priceless gift and a deep responsibility to think. When we inquire why things are as they are, the answer is, the foundation of society is laid upon a basis of individualism, conquest and exploitation, with a total disregard of the good of the whole. The structure of society built upon such wrong basic principles is bound to retard the development of all men, even the most successful ones because it tends to divert man’s energies into useless channels and to degrade his character. The result is a false standard of values. — Helen Keller, “New Vision for the Blind,” *Justice*, October 25, 1913

P1.17. Freethinkers are those who are willing to use their minds without prejudice and without fearing to understand things that clash with their customs, privileges, or beliefs. This state of mind is not common, but it is essential for right thinking; where it is absent, discussion is apt to become worse than useless. — Leo Tolstoy, *On Life and Essays on Religion*, 1862

P1.18. [It] is most inept to say that Logic abstracts from all content, that it teaches only the rules of thinking without going into what is thought or being able to consider its nature. For since thinking and the rules of thinking are the subject of logic, logic has directly in them its own peculiar content — has in them that second constituent of cognition — its
matter — about the structure of which it concerns itself. — Georg W.F. Hegel, The Science of Logic, 1812–16

P1.19. A spider conducts operations which resemble those of the weaver, and a bee would put many a human architect to shame by the construction of its honeycomb cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax. At the end of every labour process, a result emerges which had already been conceived by the worker at the beginning, hence already existed ideally. — Karl Marx, Capital Volume One, 1977 [1867]

P1.20. The animals enjoy structure. They can build nests and dams; they can follow the trail of scent through the forest. The concrete realized facts, confused and intermixed, dominate animal life. Man understands structure. He abstracts its dominating principle from the welter of detail. He can imagine alternative illustration. He constructs distant objectives. He can compare the variety of issues. He can aim at the best. But the essence of this human control of purposes depends on the understanding of structure in its variety of applications. — Alfred North Whitehead, Modes of Thought, 1938

P1.21. Our talent for division, for seeing the parts, is of staggering importance — second only to our capacity to transcend it, in order to see the whole. — Iain McGilchrist, The Master and His Emissary, 2012

P1.22. The world clearly constitutes a single system, i.e., a coherent whole, but the knowledge of this system presupposes knowledge of all nature and history, which man will never attain. Hence, he who makes systems must fill in the countless gaps with figments of his own imagination, i.e., engage in irrational fancies, ideologize. — Frederick Engels, Anti-Dühring, 1969 [1877]

P1.23. True objectivity can never be achieved — even the scientific objectivity of Sherlock Holmes isn’t ever complete — but we need to understand just how far we stray in order to approximate a holistic view of any given situation. — Maria Konnikova, Mastermind: How to Think Like Sherlock Holmes, 2013, p. 84

P1.24. Many a rational question, many a generous instinct, is repelled as the suggestion of a supernatural enemy, or as the ebullition of human
pride and corruption. This state of inward contradiction can be put an end to only by the conviction that the free and diligent exertion of the intellect, instead of being a sin, is part of their responsibility — that Right and Reason are synonymous. The fundamental faith for man is faith in the result of a brave, honest, and steady use of his faculties. — George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans), Westminster Review, 1885

P1.25. We often have difficulty discerning truth not because we have no desire for truth, but because there are desires other than the desire to know. These include the desires for prestige, power, material possessions, and material comfort. Such desires can prevent us from discerning that truth which lies behind and beyond individual and collective interest. — Charles McKelvey, Beyond Ethnocentrism, 1991

P1.26. The unconscious that Freud discovered is not a deep, mysterious place, whose presence, in mystical fashion, accounts for all the unknown; it is knowable and it is normal. What it contains is normal thought, utterly transformed by its own laws … The point for our purpose here is that unconscious thoughts are repressed and thus transformed “normal” ones, and that they are always there, speaking to us, in their way. — Juliet Mitchell, Psychoanalysis and Feminism, 1975, pg. 6–7

P1.27. The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. Man must prove the truth, i.e., the reality and power, the this-worldliness of his thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question … The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that circumstances are changed by men and that the educator must himself be educated … All social life is essentially practical. All mysteries that lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice … The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it. — Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” 1969a [1845]

P1.28. The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things. — Benedict Spinoza, Ethics, Part II, Proposition 7, 1667

P1.29. If you think soundly and if you have thoroughly mastered the subject under consideration, you will express yourself concisely and
intelligibly. When you are not dealing with the intellectual gymnastics of philosophy or the phantasmagoric ghosts of religious mysticism, and you still express yourself in an obscure and rambling manner, you reveal that you are in the dark yourself — or that you have a motive for avoiding clarity… [The] obscurantist and perplexing terminology of the bourgeois professors is no accident … it expresses not merely their own muddleheadedness, but also their tendentious and tenacious aversion of a real analysis of the question we are considering. — Rosa Luxemburg, *What Is Economics?* 1907

P1.30. It is obvious from [our] skeleton history of philosophy that philosophy could very easily come to be divorced from human life. It becomes so abstract in certain Western universities as to bring its practitioners under the suspicion of being taxidermists of concepts. And yet the early history of philosophy shows it to have had living roots in human life and human society. — Kwame Nkrumah, *Consciencism*, 1964

P1.31. If all discourses are merely “stories” or “narrations,” and none is more objective or truthful than another, then one must concede that the worst sexist or racist prejudices and the most reactionary socio-economic theories are “equally valid,” at least as descriptions or analyses of the real world (assuming that one admits the existence of a real world). Clearly, relativism is an extremely weak foundation on which to build a criticism of the existing social order. If intellectuals, particularly those on the left, wish to make a positive contribution to the evolution of society, they can do so above all by clarifying the prevailing ideas and by demystifying the dominant discourses, not by adding their own mystifications. — Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense*, 1998: 209

P1.32. Knowledge, in the sense of theoretical knowledge, refers to ideas that reveal mechanisms underlying empirical/observable events/processes. Theory tells us how to connect the different bits of information to produce the bigger picture about reality. It tells us how an apparently isolated thing or process represents wider processes. It provides knowledge that is explanatory (as well as critical). — Raju Das, “The Age of Unreason,” 2018

P1.33. Outside man and beyond him there can be nothing “ideal.” Man, however, is to be understood not as one individual with a brain, but
as a real ensemble of real people collectively realizing their specifically human life-activity, as the “ensemble of all social relations” arising between people around one common task, around the process of the social production of their life. — Evald Ilyenkov, “Dialectics of the Ideal,” 1974

P1.34. Where do incorrect ideas come from? They come from reality — like all ideas. In particular, ideological representations derive from and reflect reality. They take idealized and distorted forms, moreover, because of the contradictions and conflicts which are a part and parcel of real life. *Their power is the power of reality.* — Sean Sayers, *Reality and Reason*, 1985

**On Society**

P1.35. All knowledge that is about human society, and not about the natural world, is historical knowledge, and therefore rests upon judgment and interpretation. This is not to say that facts or data are nonexistent, but that facts get their importance from what is made of them in interpretation … for interpretations depend very much on who the interpreter is, who he or she is addressing, what his or her purpose is, at what historical moment the interpretation takes place. — Edward Said, *Covering Islam*, 1997

P1.36. There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families. — Margaret Thatcher, UK Prime Minister, 1987

P1.37. Society does not consist of individuals, but expresses the sum of interrelations, the relations within which these individuals stand. — Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, 1857

P1.38. No one will deny, of course, that everything in society is related in some way and that the whole of this is changing, again in some way and at some pace. Yet most people try to make sense of what is going on by viewing one part of society at a time, isolating and separating it from the rest and treating it as static … The alternative, the dialectical alternative, is to start by taking the whole as given, so that the interconnections and changes that make up the whole are viewed as inseparable from what anything is, internal to its being, and therefore essential to a full understanding of it. — Bertell Ollman, *Dance of the Dialectic*, 2003
P1.39. *Social reality*, seen from a dialectical perspective, is a temporal flow of determinant and determined contradictory individual and social phenomena, in which social phenomena continuously emerge from a potential state … to become realised and then returning to a potential state as individual phenomena, due to the contradictory social content of all phenomena. — Guglielmo Carchedi, *Behind the Crisis*, 2011

P1.40. The world is stranger than we can imagine, and surprises are inevitable in science. Thus, we found, for example, that pesticides increase pests, antibiotics can create pathogens, agricultural development creates hunger, and flood control leads to flooding. But some of these surprises could have been avoided if the problems had been posed big enough to accommodate solutions in the context of the whole. — T. Awerbach, A. Kiszewski and R. Levi, “Surprise, Nonlinearity and Complex Behavior in Health Impacts of Global Environmental Change: Concepts and Methods,” 2002

P1.41. Science is more than a body of knowledge. It’s a way of thinking, a way of skeptically interrogating the universe with a fine understanding of human fallibility. If we are not able to ask skeptical questions, to interrogate those who tell us that something is true, to be skeptical of those in authority, then we’re up for grabs for the next charlatan, political or religious, who comes ambling along. — Carl Sagan, PBS television interview, 1996

P1.42. Technique and science have their own logic — the logic of the cognition of nature and the mastering of it in the interests of man. But technique and science develop not in a vacuum but in human society, which consists of classes. The ruling class, the possessing class, controls technique and through it controls nature. Technique in itself cannot be called either militaristic or pacifistic. In a society in which the ruling class is militaristic, technique is in the service of militarism. — Leon Trotsky, “Radio, Science, Technology and Society,” 1926

P1.43. In coming to terms with the *simultaneous advance of society and retreat from reason*, the important thing is to explore all dimensions of the mutual interdependence of science and society. — John Gillott and Manjit Kumar, *Science and the Retreat from Reason*, 1995

P1.44. If the arrangement of society is bad (and ours is), and a small
number of people have power over the majority and oppress it, every victory over Nature will inevitably serve only to increase that power and that oppression. This is what is actually happening. — Leo Tolstoy, *On Life and Essays on Religion*, 1898

On a Decaying Culture and an Endangered Humanity

P1.45. Let us reconsider the question of mankind. Let us reconsider the question of cerebral reality and of the cerebral mass of all humanity, whose connections must be increased, whose channels must be diversified and whose messages must be re-humanized. — Frantz Fanon, 1961, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 1961

P1.46. Publicity turns consumption into a substitute for democracy. The choice of what one eats (or wears or drives) takes the place of significant political choice. Publicity helps to mask and compensate for all that is undemocratic within society. And it also masks what is happening in the rest of the world. — John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 1972

P1.47. More than anything else, it is [the] coexistence of hyper-rationality and a widespread revolt against rationality that justifies the characterization of our twentieth-century way of life as a culture of narcissism. These contradictory sensibilities have a common source. Both take root in the feelings of hopelessness and displacement that afflict so many men and women today, in their heightened vulnerability to pain and deprivation, and in the contradiction between the promise that they can “have it all” and the reality of their limitations. — Christopher Lasch, “The Culture of Narcissism Revisited,” 1990

P1.48. For the ancient Greeks, the idiot was the totally private person, the person who did not participate in the public life of the polis … We all live under idiocracy, insofar as we have become a people with little sense of the public good, people whose politics are largely devoted to personal or private issues. — Laura Penny, *More Money than Brains*, 2010, pgs. 140, 166

P1.49. There is no such a thing in America as an independent press unless it is out in country towns. You are all slaves. You know it, and I know it … The business of a New York journalist is to distort the truth, to lie outright, to pervert, to vilify, to fawn at the feet of Mammon … You know
this, and I know it; and what foolery to be toasting an “Independent Press”! We are the tools and vassals of rich men behind the scenes. — John Swinton, chief editorial writer in the 1860s for the New York Times, delivering an invited “toast” at the New York Press Club on the eve of launching his own pro-labour newspaper in 1883

P1.50. Most Americans have no idea that what we are fed by the news media … is nothing more than a portrayal of what powerful corporations (those who pay the salaries of those who run mass media) want us to believe, that what happens to pass as education is as often as not mere propaganda (e.g., that Americans are the good guys and their enemies are, without exception, always the bad guys), that what we learn in church may have very little or nothing to do with the truth, that what our parents teach us may be nothing more than an accumulation of their own personal biases… no doubt a rather subtle modification of what they were taught by their parents. — Doug Soderstrom, “The Mindless American: A Tragedy in the Making,” 2005

P1.51. Finding your way out of the propaganda matrix takes a lot of diligent work, tons of curiosity, the humility to admit you’ve been completely wrong about everything, and more than a little plain dumb luck. But if you keep hacking away at it eventually you get there, and then you can help others get there too. It’s a hard slog, but if our chains are psychological that means they’re ultimately only made of dream stuff. All that needs to happen is for enough of us to wake up. — Caitlin Johnstone, 2023 <https://caitlinjohnstone.com/2023/05/28/most-propaganda-looks-nothing-like-this/>

P1.52. The information age is actually a media age. We have war by media; censorship by media; demonology by media; retribution by media; diversion by media — a surreal assembly line of obedient clichés and false assumptions. — John Pilger, at the Logan Symposium, December 5, 2014

P1.53. The politicians are put there to give you the idea that you have freedom of choice — you don’t; you have no choice. You have owners: they own you; they own everything. They own all the important land; they own and control the corporations; they’ve long since bought, and paid for the Senate, the Congress, the state houses, the city halls; they got the judges in their back pockets and they own all the big media companies, so they control just about all of the news and information
you get to hear. They spend billions every year lobbying, lobbying to get what they want. Well, we know what they want. They want more for themselves and less for everybody else. But I’ll tell you what they don’t want, they don’t want a population of citizens capable of critical thinking. — George Carlin, 2012 (comments during an interview)

P1.54. The aim of public education is not to spread enlightenment at all; it is simply to reduce as many individuals as possible to the same safe level, to breed and train a standardized citizenry, to put down dissent and originality. — H.L. Mencken, *The American Mercury*, 1924

P1.55. We don’t need no education
   We don’t need no thought control
   No dark sarcasm in the classroom
   Teacher! Leave them kids alone!
   — Roger Waters (Pink Floyd), from the record album *The Wall*, 1979

P1.56. We shall require a substantially new manner of thinking if mankind is to survive. — Albert Einstein, 1954