

Aspects of the Philosophy of Life *

At times, in moments of reflexión, we are overeóme by the realization that our lives, as they flow by from day to day in a series of routine actions that we take for granted, are not lives at all in the real and full sense of the word, but something con-sumed by busy activity, something congealed in meaningless forms, something that has become hollow and devoid of deeper meaning - in a word, that all is not as it should be.

It is from just such a sense of malaise at an externalized and futile existence that there have arisen from time to time in the course of the history of ideas movements for spiritual renovation that, breaking through with elemental forcé, seek to restore life in its freshness, power and originality. In Germany one such movement is that known as Sturm und Drang, comprising young eighteenth-century Germán writers like Herder, Goethe and Jacobi. Another is that known as Lebensphilosophie (philosophy of life) in the nineteenth century, which found its greatest and most widely influential embodiment in Nietzsche.

Alongside these stands Dilthey, who developed an historical philosophy of life in conjunction with a methodical foundation of the humanities. A powerful influence coming from France to Germany was Bergson with his idea of an élan vital, a dynamic life-force that drove on creative development. This movement is equally to be found in the poetry of the age; Rilke, Hesse and Hofmannsthal were, at least in their early years, decisively influenced by it. The same forcé breaks through again in the [page 31/page 32] youth-movement of the early twentieth century. Common to all is the powerfully erupting demand for a genuine, strong and original life.

By looking at what typifies these recurring movements we can better understand the complex problems of human life, as they find expression in them in an objectivized form. "Life" is the concept underlying all these movements. In this emphatically enunciated word lies compacted all the yearning of the age. In it people think they are grasping genuine and original existence, free from all externalization and consolidation. We must therefore try to investigate this concept more closely.

The first underlying definition of life is becoming. Life is a constantly flowing movement, as distinct from the rigid and solid-sounding "existence"; and we are only alive as long as we abandon ourselves utterly to this constant change of form and shape. As soon as life thinks it can come to rest in a permanent shape it is fossilized. As Rilke says, whatever shuts itself off in permanence is lifeless and rigid. Man only fulfils his purpose as a living being when he strives to get beyond each stage he has reached. This awareness of constant change may indeed reach the intoxicated stage of self-consuming as expressed in the symbol of the flame. This is what Nietzsche means when he says "Insatiable like a flame I glow and consume myself ... In truth I am a flame".

Linked as a second idea to this incessant movement of becoming is the desire for life-enhancement, for a stronger, more powerful life that rejoices in its own energy. All life implies a desire for more life. Life is experienced immediately in feeling, not in the reason, which is sober and aloof, and the strength of this feeling is an expression of the intensity of life, and this is experienced most intensely where feeling culminates in passion. Thus it is that we read in Goethe's Werther: "Man is man, and the bit of reason he may have is of little

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consequence where passion rages and the limits of humanity press in upon us."

This yearning for a full life demands that we should accept life in all its manifestations, the bright as well as the dark. We must say yes not only to joy, but also to suffering, because it is precisely in suffering that we sense the strength of life.

Even danger is experienced as the highest culmination of life and is for that reason welcomed with joy. But here looms the threat of a grave error that all philosophies of life can lead us [p. 32/p. 33] into, namely that of not merely seeing a supreme and subtle attraction in danger, but of seeking danger for its own sake. Nietzsche seems to have fallen victim to this temptation when he writes: "The secret of extracting the greatest profit and the highest enjoyment from life is to live dangerously! Build your cities on Vesuvius!" With such exalted phrases the philosophy of life runs the risk of degenerating into irresponsible dare-devilry, and this, particularly if it encroaches on to the political sphere, can have disastrous consequences. We have all had firsthand experience of this. Nietzsche has in this sense been unscrupulously misused.

Enhancement of life means not only quantitative increase, but the production of more and more new forms. Life is the dark surging force that always brings forth new shapes from its subterranean source. Creativity is the essential characteristic of life. To use again Bergson's phrase, it is "creative development". Applying this to man, it means that his highest fulfilment is to be found in creative activity. Nietzsche can again be called to witness. "The only happiness is creation", we read, and there are many similar expressions.

This creative character of life has another aspect to it, and that is life's unfathomability, an aspect that fills man with a secret shudder. "I looked into your eye but recently, O Life, and felt myself sinking into unfathomable depths" - again Nietzsche, this time Zarathustra. The concept "unfathomability" has a double meaning. On the one hand it says, in an epistemological sense, that human reason, with its coarse-meshed conceptual net, can never hope to comprehend the wealth of life, and that only irrational feeling is capable of this.

It is from this that the emphasis springs that all philosophy of life characteristically places on immediate feeling as opposed to calculating reason. Only through feeling do we grasp life. The danger that looms up here is that of primitive irrationalism which scorns the strenuous effort of conceptual thinking. Many philosophers of life have succumbed more or less to this danger. But this ought not to lead to a hasty rejection of the philosophy of life, whose real aim is to pursue strenuously the conceptual comprehension of existence down to its ultimate possibility, in order to recognize and acknowledge what cannot be said.

The concept of unfathomability has a deeper meaning still. It designates the mode of being of life itself. It is not simply a [p. 33/p. 34] question of our not being able to penetrate to the ultimate ground of life, but of life's not having an ultimate ground, but of its being, by reason of its very creativity, a source, albeit an incorporeal one, from which in inexhaustible variety ever new shapes emerge.

Seen thus life does not simply mean the individual life of an individual person. It is a life that flows through him and fills him, and that he finds again in the world surrounding him, in animal and plant and in the whole of nature, all of which is equally experienced as life and with which for that reason he feels himself fraternally linked. "To be one with everything that lives, to return with serene self-oblivion into the All of nature - that is the culmination of thoughts and joys." These enthusiastic words of Hölderlin's give almost ecstatic expression to the pantheistic feeling of life that is common more or less expressly to all thinkers and poets of life-philosophical orientation.

But for all the revolutionary momentum of a life that shattered through all firm forms these men soon had to acknowledge that it is not possible in the long run to live from mere

opposition to constricting forms. Life dissipates itself into chaos if we do not succeed in allowing it to evolve new forms of its own. Even that much-maligned sober reason preserves a necessary function. Goethe's road from the Sturm und Drang of his youth to the classicism of his Weimar period is a convincing example of the transition from revolutionary upsurge to the creation of new forms. But no sooner are these new forms created than they are felt to be constricting, and a new demand for original life is made in opposition to them.

The consequence of this is the general problem of the relationship between life and form. Each depends on the other, yet both are in eternal conflict with one another. Life can only find realization in firm forms, yet must eternally rebel against the forms as soon as they have become firm. Simmel once expressed this clearly on the basis of the philosophy of life: "As long as it is life it needs form, and as long as it is life it needs more than form. Life labours under this contradiction, that it can only be accommodated in forms and yet cannot be accommodated in forms, outgrowing and breaking every form that it has created."

What is here observable in history on a large scale and has occurred in the case of the life-movements referred to can also be taken as a general definition of human life and of our own [p. 34/p- 35] lives in particular. Our lives are set within this inescapable tension between realization in fixed forms and the destruction of these forms once they have become too rigid, one side or the other holding the ascendancy at any given time. Life remains alive only in the inescapably repetitive process of creating new forms and then of breaking through the forms once they have lost their flexibility, whereupon there is a return to sources, a struggle for clear conceptual understanding and an ever renewed progression beyond the realms of thought. Seen thus, philosophy of life, for all its inherent extravagances and for all the dangers that these bring with them - dangers that we cannot close our eyes to -, has a lasting contribution to make to our understanding of human existence.

But one final consideration remains that is has not been possible so far to fit into our train of thought. Although in the case of the exponents of philosophy of life already referred to the prime concern has been for a more or less forcible development of their own lives, which often seemed to justify unscrupulous encroachment on to the lives of others, there is nevertheless another side to that feeling underlying all philosophy of life, the feeling of being "one with everything that lives", and that is a loving and caring commitment to others, lives. This is most clearly demonstrated in Albert Schweitzer, whose roots in the philosophy of life of the turn of the century have so far received little attention, especially in his ethics of respect for life. It is the demand that one should "show to all will to live the same respect for life as one shows to one's own".

The ethic based on this takes two directions. On the one hand it forbids us to injure or damage the life of others - and this means not only human, but also animal and plant life. It is here that the concept of life finds its fullest expression.

But since in the harsh reality in which we find ourselves damage to or destruction of life is often unavoidable, because we sometimes have to sacrifice life in order to preserve it, for example when we reap grain or slaughter cattle in order to feed people, we often find ourselves in a tragic conflict. So Schweitzer formulated his moral commandment in carefully balanced terms, saying that it is forbidden to injure life more than is absolutely necessary. This is not a *carte blanche* for arbitrary transgression, but imposes on man a huge burden of responsibility, since the boundary of what is absolutely necessary cannot be fixed once [p. 35/p. 36] and for all, but must be conscientiously considered in every individual case.

But even in the case of inevitable injury to the lives of others or other forms of life a feeling of guilt remains which we must strive to atone for as far as is in our power.

This leads to the second aspect, the positive and productive one, namely the obligation to provide active help which arises from the sense of fellow-suffering, of sympathy with other people and in

general with a suffering Creation. We are all subject to this elemental claim of humanity and must see how we can fulfil it. This obligation must in the first instance be fulfilled in our personal sphere, where suffering and misery confront us visibly and palpably. But as modern means of communication bring the whole of humanity into our field of vision, so the area of our responsibility is extended.