

## The Two Options

*When we become adults, we are led to give sense to our life*

There comes a time in our life when we are no longer preoccupied by the need to provide for ourselves and our dependents. At such a time, we may not be absorbed in our possessions or attracted by activities of various kinds. Our immediate environment may also no longer exert such an influence on our thoughts and feelings that we are simply produced by it. At such a time in our life, we are conscious of an overriding need to reflect on this human condition and to give an account of it. In order to cling fully to our life at this time, we have to become conscious in a deeply personal way of our humanity. The more sensitive we are, because of our spiritual depth, to the fundamental dissatisfaction that even those goods that we most desire and those plans that we most wish to complete produce in us, the more conscious we will be of this need. At a sufficiently human level, we know that it is necessary to look for a meaning in our life, if we are to follow our own destiny and accept it—unless it is to transform it instead of submitting blindly to it and being drawn along by it to death. This necessity is as immanently present to us as is the fact of life itself.

It is, moreover, impressed all the more forcibly on modern people because our lives are no longer characterized by the stability that was present in society in the recent past that afforded protection from the questions of an extreme nature that have confronted us since we became sufficiently adult. The ancestral homes and hereditary trades that were available in the past even to poor peasants and craftsmen no longer exist. The pitiless forces that dominate the economy and productivity of the modern world drive workers from place to place, uproot them, oblige them to change their work or trade and turn their whole life style and all their habits upside down, so that their only security is some kind of work—and even that security is very fragile.

When they reach adolescence, modern young persons leave the bosom of their family in response to the call of study, work, leisure, relations and

travel. And then they may also be profoundly uprooted when the intimacy of their home is disrupted or even shattered by their parents' divorce and the loss of father or mother by remarriage. This is a frequent event in the relaxed moral climate of today!

On the other hand, their horizons, which in the past restricted both their thoughts and their anxieties and passions, have become and are continuing to become wider and wider. Far from being concentrated on a few special concerns that they might be able to study in depth, as in the past, their knowledge is now often spread over a very wide surface and they have little opportunity to find a real foothold. Their knowledge is therefore reduced to the level of a vast but superficial learning. This inevitably absorbs their attention and diverts their minds away from the quest for the totally different kind of knowledge that would, thanks to the intellectual activity that they might be able to develop, enable them to discover a first authentic taste for life.

Contemporary society favors opulence and a multiplication of goods, but is not concerned with quality or beauty. Everything is directed toward continuous productivity. It is on the foundation of this principle that the future is being built. But, at the same time, we are uprooted by over-production. Our rich, abundant society is now characterized by great waste. Because we are oversaturated with goods, we are deeply discontented. These goods are of a standard type, produced in great numbers and almost identical in form. They are not made to last, but to be replaced again and again. Because of this, we have been led to the disappearance of order, care and the taste for maintenance which made a way of life with very modest demands and expectations, but one based on a life-long harmonious pattern of work and income.

It should not surprise us therefore to learn that modern persons are very often—despite the great number of distractions and amusements available to them and the technical achievements and grandiose plans for the future with which they are saturated to the point of intoxication—conscious of the void at the center of their lives. This void causes them all the more suffering the deeper and more developed their humanity is and the less capable they are of enduring work that simply occupies their time and of being satisfied with leisure activities that are no more than pastimes. It introduces them to the cancer-worm of boredom which was, in the past, known only to the idle, the unemployed and the corrupt. During these hours of emptiness, if they are unable to escape from this fear of nothingness by a flight that is not worthy of them as human beings, they are more powerfully motivated to look for a meaning in their lives than people in previous periods of history, who simply accepted this condition passively and unquestioningly from society, without having the chance or even the ability to criticize it with the aim of making it their own.

*We are able to deny that life is meaningful*

It is quite possible for us to deny a priori that our life is meaningful and has finality, to regard it as being founded in absolute non-sense and to concentrate the dignity of our being that is closed in on itself within this blunt statement. If we are logically consistent, not only at the intellectual level, but also in our concrete existence, it will certainly be impossible for us to live other than secretly within the framework of petty compromise, even if we try to do it stoically and therefore with grandeur.

In this case, we will have to live with a clearly conceived and irreducible contradiction—the need to live, which we accept, and consciousness of the emptiness of life, which we cannot repress. In such conditions, action is no more than keeping busy or pretending to be busy, even to ourselves. In the same way, being is also no more than appearing. And what is appearing if no search is made for some kind of substitute for being? A situation of this kind, if it is really experienced, would in the end condemn us to silence. Shadows do not speak—they pass by and disappear. There is, in fact, no more difficult or demanding attitude than that based on a denial of the meaning of human life. One is bound to admire those who are able to keep to it and who have the courage to speak about it, theorize about it and recommend it to others. But the fact is that no one can persist in such a state of consciousness, because it is inhuman.

It is not possible for us effectively to give our attention to thought or action as though it were a distraction or an amusement with the sole merit of not displeasing us or as though it were a game. We are prevented from doing this by the very structure of the phenomenon. When they are not purely spontaneous and when they are not used in order to hold a person, thought and action are clear evidence against the fundamental denial that life is meaningful.

The decision to build up one's life by denying that it has any value or meaning other than what is contingent and transient does not derive its homicidal power from the depths of one's nature. It is, on the contrary, a brutal denial of the fact that our intelligence is opposed to contemporary modes of thinking and speaking, modes which are not based in any way on real reflection. After having operated legitimately to clear the ground, this denial is unable to become a positive affirmation.

*People can avoid the question with which their human condition confronts them by losing themselves in the hectic activity of life*

In practice, we can always avoid the question that life is always ready to put to us. We can do so by escaping from ourselves into the hectic activity involved in acquiring more and more new goods. This activity of acquisition is

a kind of angry intoxication with living which has more in common with a desperate flight from serious life than a spontaneous, passionate outburst. It can only really deceive those who abandon themselves to it, although they are always able to catch a glimpse, from time to time, of their own blindness and deceitfulness.

As soon as they become sufficiently mature, then, it is necessary for people to discover meaning in their lives. If they do not, they are in danger of denying themselves, either by losing themselves in a multiplicity of daily concerns or by drifting into an absolute form of denial. In order to find this meaning, they can follow one of two different ways. They can either set out from a vision of the All, of which they are a part, or they can discover their own human reality in depth.

*The first way: taking a vision of the All as our point of departure, we can understand ourselves*

Following the first way, there is no need for us to be really conscious of our inner depths. It is enough if we can think of ourselves in and through the general idea that we have of the world. This idea is derived from spontaneous evidence, collective opinions that have been passively received and scientific or philosophical knowledge that has been subjected to deep reflection. In the first way, then, we confine ourselves to looking at ourselves from outside, through what is outside us, as though it were either anyone at all or someone other than ourself. Merging into the All rather than being aware of our unity with the All, we in fact have no more than our own history and not only the form, but also the theme of that history is very similar to those of all other human histories.

Within this perspective, we are led to regard the human goods that we came to know when we were lifted above our ordinary state and when we saw everything and even our own lives in a new light as strange. The memory of that state and our understanding of it, which was undoubtedly transient and occurred only at certain important times when we, as it were, concentrated within ourselves, accompany us more permanently than any other memory in the rubbish of our own past, whenever we have recourse to it in a spirit of recollection. We can also continue to enrich it if we are really in tune with it. We only want to safeguard objective and impersonal characters for these goods which were so specifically human for us. We do not admit that they have any special quality that marks them out in our favor, because we ourselves changed them by our presence. It is also because we ourselves experienced them by creating them on the basis of what we are. This is, of course, in every sense a real consecration, making them a special spiritual food, but for us alone. Despite our experience and because of the logical mystery of the

option that we have taken up, we treat them as everyday goods, however valuable they may be. In our awareness of these goods, all that we can see are transitory states which were no doubt particularly intense, but were certainly connected to fleeting stages in our lives and were probably set in motion by chance encounters or circumstances without any especially personal character and, in the long run, without any particular meaning or important consequences for us.

*The second way: taking ourselves as our point of departure, we can, in an effort to explore our inner depths, discover how we are connected with the All*

If we follow the second way, on the other hand, we refuse to repudiate the human experiences that we regard as essential because we regarded them as such when we originally became familiar with them and first tried to make them a reality in our lives. To repudiate these experiences would, after all, be to do violence to them. We are conscious of the hollow sign of what is beginning to come to life in us in the absence of our being. The more earnestly we try to live in accordance with these goods, the more completely the pursuit of them reveals that absence of being to us. Quite apart from any consideration of a general nature relating to the world or to us, we base our lives on the hope of this being which proclaims its presence in us, at the apex of our humanity, which is orientated toward an inaccessible goal. Although we cannot reach that goal, we are unable to give up the search for it without denying ourselves.

This second way, then, is quite different from the first. In it, we rely above all on the understanding that we already have of our own intimate reality. Again in contrast to the first way, this means that our experience will already have been considerably deepened by means of a personal initiative, usually taken without the knowledge of those around us and sometimes taken in spite of their opposition.

Following the first way, we attempt to base our lives on a view of the totality of reality. In this second way, we do not take this vision as our point of departure. Nonetheless, we are able, very gradually and in a way that is quite personal to ourselves, to perceive, not where any individual stands in the world, but where we stand. We are able to discover this not only by relying on our own knowledge of the universe, but also and above all because of our understanding of our own resources and our own personal demands. It is not enough for us to be drawn along by an intellectual fire or by spontaneous generosity, both of which often originate in society as a whole and are based almost exclusively on generalized views of people. This close connection with the world, which is peculiar to us is, however, quite different from the connection described in our outline of the first way, even though the attitudes and initiatives suggested by it seem, from the outside at least, to be very simi-

lar. We derive this connection from ourselves. It is our own fruit. It is invented by us. It is not imposed on us from outside, already fashioned. It does not pour us into a mold, but rather fulfills us. Despite its great size, the world with which we are so intimately connected does not swallow us up. This is because we transcend the All that may contain us, but cannot reduce us to a state in which we are only one of the elements of the world. We are able to do this by what we are in ourselves.

*We are on the right path toward our humanity when we make an explicit choice in favor of one or other of these two options*

The two fundamental options are opposed to each other, but neither they themselves nor the differences between them are seen with precision to begin with. For a long time, they remain implicit. They continue to be simple tendencies, quietly prompting us to take up certain attitudes and to behave in certain ways. They also overlap. Gradually, however, as they follow the events that take place in our inner state, one option begins to take precedence over the other, without in fact going so far as to be opposed to it or to separate itself from it. In practice, then, they neutralize each other and give rise, in our mind, to a confusion that makes it impossible for us to lead a vigorous and single life. As long as we continue to exist within this ambiguous situation, we will remain infantile, however developed we may be in other spheres. If, on the other hand, we achieve real maturity, we will be led to make a radical distinction between these two options. They require us to make an exclusive choice between them and to commit ourselves totally to the option that we have chosen. This choice and this commitment will have a decisive effect on our human destiny.