

Life in Balance, Life in Amplitude

(1939)

In the process of modern philosophical thought, insofar as Man is concerned, two typical and different attitudes have clearly crystallized. In these two attitudes there exists not only a different opinion about the essence of human being, but also about the role of philosophy in life. Although both of the types we are discussing are comprehensive titles for a great diversity of motivations and directions, prominent traits are shared that justify their aggregation. The first of these, which gravitates around the moral thinking that got the name of humanist ideology, comprehends Man as being essentially founded harmoniously; Man is called to happiness and a balance of all his forces. The process of history is at times slow and at other times faster and more energetic, but always tends as if by law towards that natural human aim of balance and harmony, for which everything is prepared and oriented in human nature. Man is a being that has not yet found the natural balance that is intrinsic to the life of all other living beings, namely a fixed form in which life runs its course. However, according to this orientation, this is just a provisional situation in life—there will come a time when human life will be so refined and organized that there will not be anything essentially unsteady and uncertain in this life, so that it will function ever more complex and artificial than the life of other creatures, but with certainty, straightforwardness, and accuracy. Opposite to this, the second type of philosophy of Man views him as a being that essentially cannot be encapsulated, can never be closed into a definitive form of life. On the contrary, Man appears to be most human and in his highest human function where the seemingly fixed form of life is scattered and where everything problematic, unsteady and extreme, which is hidden under the surface of normal living, is recovered.

Behind these two views stand two different attitudes towards life. The first type of philosophy is an expression of the common, of the

leveling out of the everyday. The everyday with its normality, in which nothing substantial happens, in which there are no radical incisions, and when in the end the grayness of life triumphs over everything—this is the character of the understanding that we encounter here. Not that it would be a boring or bored philosophy; on the contrary it is very optimistic and sees life clearly, positively, and practically. But there exists in it – openly or secretly – a resistance to everything “not normal”, extreme or sweeping, too constructive or inquisitive, fantastic or risky, that is contained in the nature of life and tempts it down dangerous paths. This philosophy holds on to the drab light of the usual day and places its “day view” against the “night view” of the experimentation of his opponent. Is it not quite clear that life has its own particular aims and rules, and that it is not necessary or even possible to penetrate deeper than what the everyday offers? Is it not clear that above all it is necessary to “cultiver son jardin”?¹ Is it not easy for people with common sense to agree about what is significant and practical, and leave to the madmen and the fantasists of this world their insignificant domain that is far from life? Life is a serious matter, but essentially simple. Let's live rationally, i.e., on the basis of deliberation, on the basis of all of our forces and powers, and we will reach the best that Man can ever possibly attain: harmony, balance, and bliss to that degree to which natural pains and losses allow Man. Those cases where life has not yet achieved harmony are due to the influence of mental, and mainly intellectual defects that are possible to get rid of through education, and to the influence of improper social institutions that are possible to get rid of through a rationally guided social process.

It is clear that this view corresponds to something very essential, some kind of fundamental need of our spirit. The task of rationally designed human coexistence seems to be easy in principle. It is difficult to understand why exactly people understand each other so little. The means and ends of human life seem to be so obvious. From the primitive hedonism of some of the parties in the epic poem of Gilgamesh, from the Indian and Chinese moral materialism or utilitarianism to the delicately refined modern systems of social evolution or social correction, this obviousness remains unchanged in the eyes of the rep-

¹ Cf. Voltaire, *Candide*, ch. XXX. Ed.

representatives of the view that is so often given the title of Enlightenment. In every person there is the inclination to think this way. This inclination becomes permanent especially in those with strongly rational characters and in enthusiasts of action when action is understood as a technical problem. But this also empowers the poetically and morally enthusiastic characters precisely with its promise of universal harmony, justice, and happiness.

Yet there is something very unfavorable that argues against the theses of this philosophy. How is it that our human reality corresponds so terribly little to this philosophy and that always when Man attempts to implement it in reality, he usually must return for a long time to the thoughts and goals that he opposed in the beginning, against which he went to fight? How is it that thoughts seemingly so obvious lead in concrete situations to their opposites, that that which in these thoughts inspires future happiness, leads to tragedy, and that which wants to create a new life with serious meaning, so easily covers up laxity and moral decay?

Of course, to such a burning question the thinkers of this orientation have an answer ready at hand. Or rather, they have a whole range of answers that, *in concreto*, differ from each other, but what they have in common is that the author's intention and the author's system does not bear any blame for failure; reality had not yet reached the level that would allow the theory to be applied, or reality will soon catch up with the unfulfilled promises. They argue long and convincingly, they know how *post festum* to diagnose in such detail all the causes and motifs and incorporate them again and again into their schemes that were not able to predict events, but curiously enough they easily know how to *absorb* them so that the shaken trust rises again and resorts to new plans, new hopes in which the old hopes are revived. Condorcet, in the middle of the revolutionary terror, in which he himself would soon drown, devises his *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*² with his perspectives on infinite perfection, on the infinite development of all positive abilities of the spirit by which Man heightens his understanding of nature and the possibilities of ruling over it. In the midst of the storm, in which the subsequent generation saw the catas-

² Jean Antoine Nicolas de Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet (1743–1794), *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain*, Paris 1795. Ed.

trophe of Enlightenment thought, he tried to fool himself, to forget himself in a dry phantasmagoric future that would correspond more to the demands of thought. Many social reformers, Saint-Simon for example, go from catastrophe to catastrophe retaining the structure of their optimism and continue to fill in new persons and conditions into it. How many times have so many Saint-Simonistes shed their skin (not mentioning the newer and more relevant people), especially *Enfantin*, so as to correct the continuous catastrophes and salvage the most essential aspects in which they experience the core of their own being. And in their humiliation, in this test to reach the roots of being, these figures take on a dimension for us that they had been missing so far, which was foreign to them and is only now imposed. They take on painful depths, they are something more than they admit to themselves, their enthusiasm obtains depth only now. That, which those who suffered with dignity did not see with the eye of the spirit that they trusted with the whole truthfulness of the soul, became obvious to them only through the hard oppressing blows of reality that willingly or not they had to respect.

For truly here the paths separate. Either Man is a finite, closed entity with a fixed form of life, and thus in principle history is a finished process, the searching for balance is justified as an aspiration for the aim of human society, all failures of our social, communal endeavors are only imperfections of a bad calculation that will finally somewhere come out right; or Man is essentially not something like that, he essentially cannot achieve balance and closure apart from by degradation, by not acknowledging himself. Fichte said, that our philosophy depends on how we are.³ Pico de la Mirandola in his famous speech on human dignity⁴ stated that God gave Man the freedom to choose and design the form of life he likes. However, the freedom of Man consists above all in the possibility to be or not be something more than Man *seems* to be. There exists a profound philosophical experience that Socrates and Plato imparted to all subsequent philosophical meditations. This is the *chorismos*, the divide between that which is and that which *only seems*

³ J. G. Fichte, "Erste Einleitung in die Wissenschaftslehre" (1797), in: *Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, Vol. I, 4: *Werke 1794–1796*, E. Lauth, Stuttgart – Bad Cannstadt 1970, p. 195. Ed.

⁴ G. Pico della Mirandola, *De hominis dignitate* (1486), Hamburg 1990. Ed.

to be, although this seeming originally concealed being and more strongly imposed itself than being did. Plato interpreted this difference as the divide between that which is understandable through reason and that which is accessible through the senses; for far-ranging speculative reasons, it is not possible to agree with Plato here. But the divide, the *chorismos*, is here and is manifested in a series of phenomena that are not of themselves proof, but that moves us closer to understanding what it is about.

The first such phenomenon is drawn from history. History is not renewed so much by changing its material, but rather that the form of life of Man changes within it. Other aims, other sentiments, other interests, other realities continually appear in history. By rebound, some of these immensely sensitive and changeable dimensions even have an impact on that which is the most fixed and constant in life: on the natural givenness of the human vital needs and on the natural surroundings that now speaks to us in symbolic speech and suggests another world.

It is possible to draw the second from the *comprehension* of history. Even the remote mental achievements and forms are accessible to our study, and although we may often be mistaken which is human, we might not always be able to disengage ourselves from ourselves and hence we may distort our object of study, we still very often succeed in *truly penetrating* into a foreign world, into dimensions so far hidden from us, and then it is like our eyes are opened: "in the secret [...] a new heaven is opened up, the sun of your day projects a shadow in a new direction".⁵

Another hint grows out of observation of oneself. Our life is not played out on level ground, but rather in various depths; each depth has its own conception of the others and knows about its own relation to the level ground of the average calm of life. Our mental development is not, figuratively speaking, a mere change of the objects in our living space, but rather movement from room to room, during which horizons into the indefinite open up from all sides.

A further hint is in the analysis of culture. Its *creation* was not and is not a mere attitude of indulgence and utility towards the richness of human life, but rather the fascination by the whole of the world always

⁵ O. Březina, *Čas*, in: *Ruce*, Praha 1901. Ed.

lives in human life, (a more detailed analysis would be needed to show this), and this by a different way for each of the different cultural powers like science, philosophy, art, *vita activa*, and religion. This relation to the whole, this fascination with the whole—how else to construe this than as an essential relation of Man to that which is most universal, most comprehensive, elevated above everything limited and finite? What is finite itself can certainly never experience the infinite, the suprafinitive and have a rapport with it.

So now perhaps it is possible to state at least certain indices that prepare the ground for a philosophy of amplitude. What does this philosophy mean? First of all, it is necessary to clarify what I understand to be a life in amplitude. I do not mean by this the *mere intensity* of life; a life in balance can be full of enthusiasm and pretend to be mysticism, of which we have so many examples from utopian socialism. For instance, the Saint-Simon sect provides tons of examples; its adherents talk about God, future life, metempsychosis, they mixed a foggy metaphysics with theories about free love and the first projects about economic planning, and they took it as especially important that they were considered to a religious formation; and yet they could not dupe the provident eye of Carlyle who exposed their "religion" to be political propaganda. Amplitude is where Man leaves behind him the everyday level of the usual life of enchantment, the level of sober untruth that veils vision before the true heights and true dangers of our existence—there towards which Man heads with a calm expression and before which our timid finitude flees.

What does this necessary, diligent, reasonable everyday finitude want, what does it wish for? Nothing less than a guarantee of itself, a guarantee of a happy ending, a guarantee of the reasonable and practical purposefulness of living. Even though I will not be myself, my life will remain in the work I have done, passed down to those who follow. *Multaque pars mei vitabit Libitinam*.⁶ The life of the individual and the society must have a kind of fixed center that it can be leaned upon. It is possible to close one's eyes to the nothingness that will someday embrace us completely, and give oneself over to the frenzy of work and activity. It is possible to have friends and opponents, to play an immense game with the lives of thousands and flip the switches of

⁶ Q. Horatius Flaccus, *Exegi monumentum*, in: *Carmina*, tII, 30, 6-7. Ed.

history. It is possible to believe and hope that behind it all stands a benevolent force that sets all of the deficiencies of life right; one Russian philosopher formulated it recently that life made sense only then when it lasts long enough to be able to become worthy to be lived so that its subject can take it upon himself with dignity.

The timid finitude closes its eyes before the fact that life is bordered by two chasms, between which there exists a minute enclave of calm like a brief pause, which only makes sense in relation to that which is not a pause. The contingent person with his contingent aims has to become eternal, has to be victorious in the competition of history—this also is a “philosophy of history” that corresponds to this standpoint. Already in advance he experiences the satisfaction of the victory that will never be real for him, and in this way he projects himself so far beyond himself, far outside of himself. This self-elongation, self-projection seems to be something reasonable and obvious: it makes possible organized and noble work that then gives one the impression that he is the lord over his own history, that he fights for ideas, that he lives in his empirical life a kind of divine drama, in which empirical Man is only the surface layer of a more profound divine life.

Furthermore, the average life yearns to be spared the shaking that we seemingly encounter contingently, which signifies a test, loss, pain, which in the program of practical life that is arranged according to plans and aims for successes, signifies sheer deficit. It yearns for life to be arranged as practical as possible, with excluding most of these deficits. This average life does not doubt that its apparent satisfaction is the real fullness of life. It seeks to elude that which, in spite of all official optimism, it grasps as its inner deficit which awaits the time that the stream of life would reach the next vortex when the deficit becomes a real catastrophe. Life knows about its inner weakness and its first reaction is to elude its consequences.

The philosophy of amplitude is one that is conscious that life must in each moment bear the entire weight of the world and accepts this duty. The philosopher does not want to look for and construct artificial paradises that transform the human future, and does not want to awake banal hopes. He attempts to make the world easy by a different method.

He starts from the view that the *life in amplitude* is a fact. We experience the life in amplitude when we extricate ourselves from the *life in enclave* and go, as Jaspers says, to the boundaries of our existence.

(This *advancing to the boundaries* as a thought inspiring the modern philosophy of existence is correct and positive. However, the carrying out of this thought in existential philosophy, e.g., in Jaspers, is not positive enough—it is too hesitant.)

The boundaries, to which Man is constricted, are of two types. On the one hand, there is physical weakness and Man's limitation of will, manifesting in physical pain, misery, disease, oppression, guilt, and death. This always possible and, in this possibility, constantly present deficit is not contingent for Man. If these possibilities did not exist, Man would not be what he is in his essence. The ability to suffer is positive. This exists also in animals, but Man suffers more and deeper. This greater suffering comes from a higher consciousness. The higher consciousness is a second, inner boundary that is inside us deeper than we ourselves are: that overcoming of the moment, that advancing to the universal horizon, which lives in us and allows us to encounter reality, which we deal with and that never completely fulfills us. The unified structure of the experienced world is something different than a collection of physical and mental realities. And this structure is the reason why the more we hope and the clearer we see life, consequently also the more we suffer.

Living in amplitude means a *test* of oneself and a *protest*. In amplitude, Man is tested by exposing himself to the extreme possibilities that are mere abstract, distant possibilities for the common life, and protests against those that are usual and obvious. Strangeness and peculiarity, however, are not the motives here since the pursuit of them is something so common. Man reaches amplitude under the fascinating impression of the boundaries that encircle his life. He must face these boundaries, if he searches for *truth*. If we want truth, we are not allowed to look for it only in the shallows, we are not allowed to be fascinated by the calm of ordinary harmony; we must let grow in ourselves the uncomfortable, the irreconcilable, the mysterious, before which the common life closes its eyes and crosses over to the order of the day.

The existence in amplitude often gives to the usual consciousness the impression of unnaturalness, disease, spasms, which the healthy, normal person cannot handle. Of course, there are various types of such a life: Socrates does not give the impression of being spasmodic, and yet his life rose to heights practically unattainable; in Pascal there is not only the vehemence of the attacker and heroic defender, but also a mystical calmness. But Kierkegaard, with his eternal reflection, with

his tense dialectic gives the impression of inhuman ice; Nietzsche the impression of convulsion; Dostojevsky the impression of ongoing crisis. All of them are in some way inaccessible; we feel them protrude from our warm surroundings into the icy vacuum. To endure this position, to truly undergo it, is a strange phenomenon that is difficult to understand; we truly see that they often completely burn up rather than abandoning this position and descending—and in this position they protest vigorously against the all too human illusions, against the naïve paradises of the huddled, “harmonic” souls, against those life dreams in the calm, untroubled tracks of employment, work, usual obligations, utility, harmony, and happiness. They also look for their paradise, but it is not a paradise of closed, but rather open eyes.

By taking off into amplitude, they employ the freedom inherent to Man. Only by doing this, they make the potential freedom real, since only by acting can they attain that which Man *truly is*, and thus that which *he truly can be*. That is how they realize the *chorismos*, the chasm between the two orientations of humanity, between the path of all matter and the narrow path of the spirit.

For the spirit is not, as so often it is supposed by those who depict it in a too convenient way, living from the ready-made. It is not the mere occupation with the sublime or immaterial, but rather it is a relation to the world, living from comprehending the world as a whole, as attained in amplitude. This is an universal interpretation, coming from a light ignited not intellectually, but from the life of the spirit striking against the hard stones of our borders.

He, who takes such a possibility upon himself, is free in a profound sense. He frees himself of the mere seeming that nails us to deep weaknesses, to futile hopes. The awoken freedom revealed what seemed to be as seeming and in accepting the danger acquired only now its full safety, acquired for Man a life out of his own roots, out of his own foundation. Because in this, in the struggle for freedom, in the struggle with himself, Man took possession of himself, of the deepest that he has in himself or that he is able reach. In this spark this new life appears to him.

Already from the time of Rohde,⁷ it has been well known that the Greek epos – which formulated a bright world of Olympic gods and

⁷ Erwin Rohde (1845–1898), *German classical philologist*. See also E. Roh-

independent, courageous, free people – was an act of liberation from the dark power of the chthonic myth; more recently Bäumler made an attempt to show Greek tragedy in a similar light.⁸ But also Greek philosophy, with its principle of participation in ideas, of the getting under control of being by means of idea, is essentially a way to endure when coming face to face with the panic of myth and the shallowness of popular religion. Christianity meant and means a descent into the sphere of pain and guilt, at the retrieval of their meaning—and again here a new world spreads out in front of our eyes. This all is only a crude illustration of what we want to say here: in real amplitude Man does not only get under control his external, but also his internal boundaries. There does not exist any true spiritual activity arising only from the sphere of ideas. Our internal border, the world that lives within us, does not cause us pain. However, pain, brought under control and endured in amplitude, teaches us to discover the world and shows us that we are free in interpreting its meaning.

Pain casts or can cast us into that dimension that is not closed to us, to the dimension of our own depth, which cannot be plundered. For this discovering of the inner, altered light, it is possible even to love pain, which is so much deeper and greater than the inebriation from power and success. The essence of humanity is not to feel fulfilled by finiteness. But power, success, and “mundane” greatness are finite things. Crude souls can speak about spiritual imitations of mundane successes, about the sour grapes of the world. But he who has been transformed by pain, no longer has a yearning for the vulgar bliss and tough power of the day, as long as he does not fall down to an entirely different level. He praises that which hindered him from succumbing to the common emptiness and aimlessness that is called the desire for power and happiness. Therefore, all of the true lovers of the eternal and infinite are above all those who have gone through adversity and pain. We take adversity here in its literal meaning of opposing the spontaneous huddling of human nature, going against our illusions, against our beloved fears, fed by secret wishes, against our superstitions.

de, *Psyche. Seelenkult und Unsterblichkeitsglaube der Griechen*, Vol. 1–11, Freiburg im B. 1890–1894. Ed.

⁸ Alfred Bäumler, “Preface” in: F. Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, Stuttgart 1955. Ed.

The *philosophy* of amplitude follows the whole play of human experiences, standpoints, and life attitudes, it warns against the usual illusions and inspires the love for the eternal—this love alive in this philosophy.

Ideology and Life in the Idea

(1946)

In the period between the two wars, there was much debate about how Man has become more problematic for himself than ever before. During this period, the contemporary understanding of Man had broken apart, and out of this different “ideas of Man” had allegedly emerged. Thus, theory has been marked by disunity, while at the same time a deeper crisis has been played out in *praxis*. It is evident that from the First World War up to today one of these ideas of Man is still in crisis; i.e., the idea of Man which can be called specifically modern, which has its roots in Enlightenment thought on nature and human nature, and out of which humankind’s programs and ideals have successively emerged since 1715 until today.

When discussing concept and idea, we need to distinguish specifically between the two. The concept of Man is a theory about him, a theory that stands alongside other theories; it is a theory, as it does not engage us. As such a concept can become myth or ideology, which do engage, which accommodate these tendencies, needs, and forces that lay dormant within us to lead, direct, and draw them together for the needs of social action.

However, ideology – although it engages, conceptually grasps, and binds us – seizes Man externally, like certain forces in the overall complex of forces. Forces such as what is required to achieve a certain social aim that is solely valuable and valid; so that everything else, not the least of which is the will and activity of the individual, acquires its significance from this aim alone. An idea is something distinct from this: an idea must be embodied, and this embodiment in life concerns our innermost personal core and can never be indifferent towards this inner core. An idea appeals to us, not so that we put ourselves “at the service of the Idea”, but rather to be in the Idea, to exist in the Idea.