PROF. OTTO FRIEDRICH BOLLNOW, UNIVERSITY OF TÜBINGEN

The Meaning of Hope*

Due to the influence of Existentialism, the role and significance of hope in the total pattern of human life has gradually assumed a central position in all philosophical discussions. The pessimistic philosophy of the Existentialists sees in hope no more than a fatal illusion which distorts and colours the sober severity of our lives. To relinquish all hope is therefore the first precondition for any serious attempt to overcome the obstacles which life sets before us.

In order to come to grips with this idea, let us first take a look at the concept of hope as expressed in the works of the poets before the advent of Existentialism. We discover that they view the problem from two different angles. In most cases, hope appears as a beneficent and life-supporting power which arouses the latent abilities slumbering in man, and enables him to perform feats of which he would otherwise be incapable. It gives comfort and inspires him with courage when sorrow and despair threaten to overcome him. Thus we find, in "Fidelio", an invocation of hope as the "star of the weary", and Goethe's phrase of "Hope, gentle comforter goading us to noble ends" suggests how closely it is related to the power of the imagination. Hoelderlin addresses hope in much the same fashion: "O Hope, thou fair and never-failing guide. Thou who dost not forsake the house of those that weep." The power to comfort and the power to give strength are the two aspects which, in the discussions on the nature of hope, have been constantly and unanimously emphasized.

On the other hand, however, there are interpretations of hope which object to the above positive evaluation. "He who lives of hope, dies of hunger", says an old adage. Hope, it seems to say, conjures up, in the mind of man, deceptive, wishful images, thus [263/264] preventing him from taking a clear view of the realities of life and turning him into a dreamer who fails to come to grips with the exigencies of life. From this point of view, the close relations existing between hope and the imagination are subjected to more critical scrutiny: hope is said to imply nothing but empty and fond imaginings which man would all too gladly lake for realizable possibilities.

The same idea, although in a friendlier guise, occurs again in an unfinished dramatic poem of Goethe, "Pandora". Elpore, i.e. Hope, is conceived, significantly enough, as the daughter of Prometheus, the thinker who tries to provide for the future, and contrasted with her twin sister, Epimeleia, i. e. Anxiety. Speaking to the eagerly listening crowd, she says of herself: "Whatever you want, whatever you wish, I am unable to refuse it to you, and from me, as a good girl, you will never receive any answer but 'yes'." Hope thus promises man the fulfilment of even his most preposterous wishes, and, only a few lines earlier, Goethe makes her say: "It becomes me lo promise the impossible."

In contrast, to this altitude, which is by and large a positive one, an extremely critical altitude towards hope has asserted itself among the Existentialists. Camus, in his "Myth of Sisyphus", has probably gone furthest of all, for in this work he not only demands a conscious renunciation of all hope but also puts forward the belief that man, even in a state of utter hopelessness, can still be happy. The "absurd hero" which he depicts here in an impressive scene is the embodiment of Existentialist man and is, by virtue of this very concentration on an extreme case, especially suited to serve as a model example by which to show the problems of such a position. So far as our own formulations are concerned, we would do well to keep to this model example, for when the myth closes with the words "One must consider Sisyphus happy", the author stresses the fact that Sisyphus is happy in the midst of the utter hopelessness of his

* Published in: Universitas (engl.) 4 (1961) 263-273. The page-breakes are added in […] into the continuing text.

situation.

As his starting point, Camus takes the thought that "there is no worse punishment on earth than a fruitless and hopeless task". For this reason, as we all know from ancient mythology, the gods have condemned the rebellious Sisyphus to such a task. The truly terrifying part of this punishment lies in the fact that Sisyphus is fully aware of the futility of his efforts. "Where, in fact, would be his suffering if hope of success would buoy him up at every step." This sentence is the clear expression of the crucial problem – [264/265] it is the hopelessness of his endeavours, it is the very problem of hopelessness as such: the fact, that Sisyphus cannot simply give up his task and resign, but must, again and again, summon up the energy to continue his efforts in spite of their hopelessness. And yet Camus maintains that Sisyphus is happy with these, his hopeless efforts. The reason which he advances for this - at first glance - -surprising statement is - just as Kierkegaard maintained about despair - that in actively affirming the hopelessness of his situation, once he has recognized it, Sisyphus at the same time transcends it. "The very lucidity of his awareness which should have constituted the essence of his torment, completes his victory." There is no such thing as a Fate that could not be transcended by an attitude of scornful defiance." This is to say that the effort as such, even when there is no prospect of ever succeeding, can give man such a feeling of satisfaction that no outward failure, however great, can possibly destroy it. And so Camus comes to the decisive conclusion: "The struggle for the peak is sufficient in itself. One must consider Sisyphus happy."

This particular attitude corresponds to Kant's ideas on the ethics of conscience, according to which the moral value of any action is quite independent of its outward success. This again tallies exactly with Sartre's maxim: "All that counts in a man's actions is the quality of total commitment." But whereas, in the case of Kant and also of Sartre, we are concerned merely with judging an action from the moral point of view, i. e. without considering whether man is happy or unhappy as a result of that action, Camus goes much further. Firstly, he teaches that not only can success be left out of the question of judgment altogether, but that failure is certain; secondly, he speaks not only of duty - which has to be fulfilled against one's will - but also demands that man, in full awareness of the futility of his efforts, should, on top of all this, feel happy. Without any doubt he is right in saying that the action as such — the "struggle for the peak" - can give man a degree of satisfaction that cannot be marred even by failure.

But on the other hand, one can speak meaningfully of a struggle only when there is at least some prospect of ultimate success, and it is this prospect of success, however slight it may be, which actually makes the struggle what it is. Where the situation is utterly hopeless, the basis for further effort is destroyed. There remains nothing but defiance, which expresses itself in "contempt" for one's fate. This, however, implies that in the total hopelessness of in- [265/266] cesssantly frustrated effort, happiness is no longer possible. Camus' assumption therefore, if taken to express more than just a postulate, is paradoxical. Even the "absurd hero", despite his dogged resolution, finally ends up in that state of despair without hope which is the fate of every Existentialist. In such a state it is impossible to lead a meaningful human existence. In order to achieve that, it is necessary for man to cast off the fetters of his captivity in loneliness and thus regain a healthy attitude towards the future. In this newly established relationship, the future would no longer appear as a sinister menace, driving man into an altitude of grim and gloomy determination, but as an infinite source of new possibilities to be revealed to him in this new-found hope. In contrast to the narrowness of the future as seen by the Existentialists, this is the only true future, i. e. an open and unpredictable future. But in spite of its unpredictable and incalculable character, the future is not considered as a threatening influence, as it might seem to our scheming and calculating consciousness which would like to rationalize even the future. On the contrary - it reveals itself as the solid foundation in which the life of man is grounded, upholding him and preventing him from be-

ing plunged into nothingness. Thais, hope is the expression of the confidence we set in Life, and is allied to a feeling of gratitude for thus being upheld.

Looking at it from this point, we realize that hope goes much deeper than mere expectation. Hope alone allows life to take the form of a process steadily moving towards the future. It is the factor which enables man to go on with the business of life, if, by living, we mean the ability to prepare for the morrow in the calm conviction that no irreparable disaster can befall us. Hope thus points to the deeper ground in which the feelings of patience and security are rooted, and without which man would never be able to relax his attention or go to sleep tranquilly. Although both, the fixity of purpose which determines, action and expectation, are directed toward the future, it is a future which has been reduced to the single point of a definite goal. Such a narrowing down of the future to a single point, however, is possible, as it would seem, only on the basis of an originally given vastness of scope. It is this vast range of possibilities which is opened up by hope and, from here, we learn to recognize in hope the ultimate condition of life. In order to reach this insight, it is necessary, however, to understand the position of hope in the over-all framework of human life.

We had best proceed by asking what, actually, is the contrary [266/267] of hope in order lo apprehend, by thus opposing it to its antagonist, its true position in our lives. Fear, so often taken as the opposite of hope ever since the Stoics' theory of emotions, is not enough. For fear is always a definite emotion, and therefore not the proper antithesis to that aura of indefinite anticipation which envelops the vast horizon of new possibilities held out to man by Hope (quite apart from the fact that it has not the same definite relationship to the future, since one can also be afraid of what is already present). Anxiety which, as a state of undefined emotions, has always been distinguished from fear as a definite emotion, must also be excluded, for it lacks even more the orientation toward the future so characteristic of hope.

The most likely choice, then, would seem to be a condition of hopeless despair. Marcel, at any rate, opposes despair to hope when he says: "Hope is the act by which this temptation viz. despair, is actively or triumphantly overcome."

According to him, therefore, hope is the power which enables man to vanquish, again and again, the perpetual inroads of despair. However, there are objections even against this definition. To start with, it might appear in this case that despair is the primary factor, and that hope had to be wrested away from it, whereas we have good reason to believe that hope is the primary factor, in some form or other, and despair only a subsequent threat to an original state of security. And, secondly, despair is something far too active. Kierkegaard was right in observing that despair, acknowledged as such, already lakes us beyond itself. It would, therefore, seem more accurate to choose hopelessness, in its sense of dull indifference, as the decisive opposite of hope. It is that form of despondency which Kierkegaard once described as the original sin, the acedia, in the final analysis, of scholastic philosophy which is only poorly translated as spiritual indolence, the despondent weariness of spirit which persuades man that there is no point in making another effort because everything is lost anyway. This is the state in which man, having lost the will to go on, allows himself lo fall unresistingly into the abyss. Seen from this point, hope becomes the power with which man resists the temptation of letting himself go, because it generates the confidence that the future will treat him with kindness and providence.

Hope therefore ceases to remain only a special concern of psychology or of ethics, and takes a central place in the existence of man. If the opposite of hope is the ultimate inconsolable [267/268] weariness of the soul, then this speechless and apathetic inconsolability is even worse than the burning of despair, because it implies a complete abandonment of life itself, an abandonment which has relinquished even the last spark of resistance. In that case, however, hope is the factor which makes life, as a chain of actions and aspirations directed toward the

future, ultimately possible. This means nothing else but that hope is the element in which the soul is grounded. The whole argument of this article has been leading up to this claim.

This would also appear to be the meaning of the sentence written by Goethe: "Hope ... is the most precious portion inherited by the living, of which they cannot dispose even if they wanted to." Consequently, hope must be accounted an integral part of those conditions whose absence would make life impossible; so that men cannot - not even out of spite, wilfully and intentionally - eradicate this sentiment from their hearts. Even when, plunged into despair, they refuse to hope, and think that they have banished all traces of hope from their minds — they still hope, although they may not be aware of it, as long as they are alive.

Even suicide, as Plügge has so impressively demonstrated, is born of a certain distorted form of hope. Life without hope could only lake the form of a state of apathetic vegetation, and even in this condition, although hope may have sunk to the level of thoughtlessness, it is still present, although deep down and in barely discernible form. II remains, then, an incontrovertible reality that "men would be unable to rid themselves of hope, even if they wanted to", that hope is an integral part of life itself. And Marcel seems to have meant something similar when he said that "hope and life are closely allied to each other", indicating that there is a direct and very close connection between the two, without going much further into the nature of this relationship.

How can we define the connection between life and hope more precisely? In order to avoid any vagueness, let us first take a closer look at what we mean by Life. Since it is possible to speak of hope only in the case of a definite person who hopes, we understand life as the formally, but not materially defined structure of human existence which, in ordinary speech, is briefly called the human soul. And when Marcel says, in one place, that "hope is perhaps the very substance of which the soul is made", this sentence may, by its very vagueness, be especially suited to work out our own position. Hope as the substance of which the soul is made – this [268/269] could first of all mean that it forms, so to speak, the food on which the soul lives. This would mean that, in order not to break down in despair, the soul needs the inspirations of hope to overcome her weariness. Even if they should prove to be an illusion, it would not matter, since even the illusion incites man to go on. This, however, cannot be the meaning of the passage; for if hope is to be a form of nourishment, it must certainly be a more substantial one.

But when Marcel speaks of the substance of which the soul is made, he may understand it as the material of which our soul consists. But this interpretation proves to be problematical too, for what sort of "substance" could this be? It would only mean that all the emotions of the soul are, in a way, made up of hope as the substance, and are found to be mere stifled or stunted hopes.

Now it is time to point out that we are speaking of Hope and not of hopes. The meaning of this is more than just the difference between the individual and the collective terms. In that case, however, we are confronted with the difficulty to apply the concept of substance to the soul. If the soul can be conceived as something that is capable of a structural, but not of a material definition, then the above phrase, described as vague, must be understood to mean that hope designates the structure which determined the soul. And the fact that it is the substance of the soul which is given so much emphasis, can only mean that this substance is the ultimate fundamental structure.

Hope, however, we had characterized as a temporal relationship, as a certain attitude towards the future. In this case, Marcel's phrase can only mean that hope is the original and supporting ground defining the inner temporal structure of human life. The assertion therefore is that the original temporal form of human life is determined by hope. And this is in fact the assertion that we are making here.

This is very close to the theory put forward in our day by Martin Heidegger, and yet contradicts it radically at the same time. As is well known, Heidegger teaches, that temporality is the fundamental defining factor of human life whose individual features it integrates into a pattern. This discovery is one of his greatest achievements, and our modern understanding of temporality is based on Heidegger. In addition, however, Heidegger maintains that this temporality, in its concrete manifestation, must be defined as "care". And he explicitly adds that other ways of facing the future, such as willing [269/270] and wishing, inclination and desire, can only be interpreted as derivations of that which, in its original form, can only be apprehended as care. Among such, although not specifically mentioned, would also be hope.

This, however, raises for us the decisive question: what is the relationship between our interpretation of temporality based on hope and Heidegger's interpretation as care? All our arguments have hitherto been leading up to the following thesis: not only suffers Heidegger's position from the serious defect that it does not account for hope as a phenomenon of human temporality which is equal to, and related to, care, but not its derivative, thus fatally distorting our understanding of temporality and man. Hope is in fact a more fundamental factor than care, and the latter can be properly seen only in the light of hope.

This question touches upon the very core of the present controversy among philosophers. Here we come up against the crucial problem upon which the debate with Existentialism must center. And only if we succeed in furnishing sufficient proof for this function of hope, we can expect to overcome Existentialism from within.

For this purpose it is necessary that we - without equating Heidegger with Existentialism - take our bearings from his interpretation of temporality as care, in which the possibilities of Existentialist thought have reached their final consequence. We must proceed carefully, however, since Heidegger himself expressly emphasized that his definition must be understood as a purely formal ontological one, i. e. he does not think of any factual reference to a state of emotions, such as care or sorrow. According to Heidegger, the total ontological pattern of Existence can be described in the following way: to be in Existence means to live, projected ahead of oneself, in a state "of being-with-something". This state of being corresponds to the intended meaning of the term care, which is used in a mere ontological and formal sense. Any ontic tendency of being, such as worry or its absence, is excluded from this sense. In order to understand the choice of the term more fully, we had better think of its meaning as "circumspect taking care of something". When speaking of care Heidegger thus means the structural pattern, that man who, in any situation, is always concerned with something and in the final analysis with himself, projects himself, in a mood of resolution, towards the true forms of his being. [270/271]

On the other hand, however, one can argue that the apparently merely formal ontological structure is determined by the ontic basis on which it is built; furthermore, the apparently merely formal "being-ahead-of -oneself" in a state of care forces upon the phenomenon of temporality a onesided and inadequate interpretation. Only by including other important ontic phenomena, we shall obtain the complete design of the structure of human temporality. To prepare for this is one of the major reasons for the present, far-reaching investigations.

From this point of view, the result so far obtained is the following: the resoluteness of care must inevitably burn itself out in a vain adventurousness, so long as hope does not offer a wide range of possibilities within which this resoluteness can be directed towards concrete objects. Without hope any form of resolution moves towards dark nothingness where the hopeless despair is born that we discussed above. In hope, however, resolution finds the firm, supporting foundation which it could never have engendered through its own efforts. Hope, therefore, must always be prior to care, which it envelops and upholds.

These results would have to be included in a more comprehensive discussion of temporality;

for, so far as we have developed this aspect, it cannot yet be applied to the total triple structure of temporality. In order to attain this comprehensiveness, the qualities of gratitude and confidence would have to be included in the discussion, since hope is only one of a number of attitudes towards the future. At this point, however, what has been said of the most important form of our relationship to time, viz. the future, may suffice as representative of the whole complex.

When thus, however, hope constitutes the fundamental structure of the human soul, i. e. something which can never be lost, then the question arises as to how our attitude to hope can become a problem of ethics. If hope is to be considered as a virtue, as we claim it is, it cannot be taken simply as a fundamental structure of the soul which is always there; rather, there must remain a certain degree of latitude in man's possible altitudes to hope.

First of all, let me remind you that the last shred of hope which remains intact in even the most desolate life, and without which even the least planning for the morrow would be impossible, should be distinguished from the fully realized hope. Generally speaking, the difference consists in the shape given to the same possibility: on the one hand, it has been realized in only a stunted form, on the [271/272] other it has received complete realization and has been made the solid foundation of life. We are obliged to give the same term to both of these forms of hope, because otherwise the inner connection would be obscured, but it is only in its second sense that hope can be considered a virtue.

Immediately, however, a new difficulty crops up: in what way can this fully realized hope be called a virtue? For man cannot generate it by dint of his own efforts, as for instance valour or justice; nor can it be created by an effort of the will. Rather, it comes to man, without any effort on his part, as a sort of gift or grace, like other virtues such as patience and good cheer. It is therefore necessary, by taking the case of hope as an example, to return once more to the special status of this kind of ethical values. They are virtues of a special kind, whose peculiarity makes them stand out clearly from the simpler types of virtues; nevertheless, they remain virtues in so far as the possibilities given with them would immediately vanish if they were not grasped and retained by our moral effort.

But there is another objection: the special status which it is so difficult to describe is the very thing that, since scholasticism, we are wont to call theological virtue. As such it is listed among the three cardinal Christian virtues - Faith, Love and Hope, which have always been contrasted with the four cardinal virtues of Plato. In recent limes Pieper has made the teachings of St. Thomas Aquinas accessible to the modern mind. He makes a distinction between natural and supernatural hope. But if this were the last word in the matter, it would no longer be possible to speak of the virtue of hope in a philosophical sense, nor to consider its deeper anthropological significance. For if hope were a natural condition of the soul, it would no longer be a virtue; and supernatural hope would be, as the grace accorded by a personal God, the privilege of the Christian believer. The term grace, then, used several times in this context in a figurative sense, would be a rather vague term for something which can be adequately described only in theological terms. Seen in this light, the virtue of hope would be the subject of theology and, as such, outside the boundaries of philosophy.

Such a strict delimitation, however, simplifies matters unduly. We do not propose to deal with the theological implications of the concept of hope, as this would be beyond the scope of a purely philosophical investigation. But it seems that there lies, between the natural sphere on the one hand and the supernatural one on [272/273] the other, a third sphere which has so far been neglected by both sides, and in which hope with the specifically ethical connotation which we have stressed seems to exist. Seen from the theological angle, it would appear to be a primitive or nascent form of Christian hope. Its existence seems to be confirmed by Maine de Biran's phrase that "Religion came to strengthen the hope that was given to man by Na-

ture". These words admit that man is possessed of such a hope already as a natural being; and that this naturally given hope need only be confirmed by the supernatural means of knowledge provided by Religion. For our purpose this would imply that hope as such does not stand in need of confirmation through positive religion.

For this reason, it seems legitimate to see in hope, from the philosophical point of view, more than a mere primitive or nascent form, namely an independent phenomenon which, as such, does not require the transposition to the theological level. Hope, thus conceived, would be a legitimate subject for philosophy — one of special significance in the present debate with the nihilist ideas of Existentialism.