Chapter One

The Significance of Hope in Human Life

What oxygen is for the lungs, such is hope for the meaning of human life. Take oxygen away and death occurs through suffocation, take hope away and humanity is constricted through lack of breath; despair supervenes, spelling the paralysis of intellectual and spiritual powers by a feeling of the senselessness and purposelessness of existence. As the fate of the human organism is dependent on the supply of oxygen, so the fate of humanity is dependent on its supply of hope.

It is scarcely necessary to prove that Western humanity of today, at least in Europe, has entered a phase when it is feeling an acute and distressing need of breath through the disappearance of hope. Everyone is becoming aware of this, to a greater or less degree, and if anyone is not aware of it he can find the proof of it in contemporary literature and philosophy. Why this is so, and how this situation has come about, and whether it is inevitable or whether there exists any way of escape from this pervading sense of hopelessness, is the object of this book.

Hope means the presence of the future, or more precisely it is one of the ways in which what is merely future and potential is made vividly present and actual to us. Hope is the positive, as anxiety is the negative, mode of awaiting the future. Through anxiety and hope man relates himself to the future in passive expectation. But he may also have an active rather than a passive attitude towards the future. He may make plans and projects in order to shape the future according to his wishes. Through such an active attitude man imagines himself to be the architect of his own destiny. In that case the future ceases in some measure to be mere

futurity. It does not come upon man from without, but he goes towards it, anticipating it and controlling it. The life and thought of modern Western European man is plainly distinguished from that of man in other epochs and other culture cycles by the fact that this active attitude through which man seeks to control his future emerges ever more predominantly into the foreground. But in proportion as man has the feeling that he has power over his future and can plan and determine it, those passive modes of realizing the future through anxiety and hope recede into the background. He who creates his future need neither hope nor fear.

At some point in the course of modern history – it was most probably at the time of the Renaissance – Western European man began to experience this strange confidence in his own powers of controlling and constructing his future. From that time onwards hope loses significance in proportion as self-confidence grows. If man had his future entirely in his own hands, he would no longer either hope or fear. Instead of waiting in expectancy of what the future might bring, he would sit, so to speak, at the switchboard which regulates it, certain at every moment which lever to pull, which button to press. He would indeed be the master and controller of his future. He would even feel that the expression "master of his fate" was no longer relevant, was unworthy, since "fate" would still be reminiscent of the idea that his future was something sent to him, that he did not shape it as its author and determiner. Western man has not yet reached this stage of development, but his mental picture of himself increasingly resembles that of the man at the switchboard.

But no one can altogether conceal from himself the fact that man is very far from being the unqualified arbiter of his future. He cannot remain unaware that his power and freedom to shape the future is limited because dependent on factors over which he has no control. One such is nature; a second is the other, the not-self.

It is obvious that man is dependent on nature. The attempt to eliminate or at least to reduce this dependence more and more

is what we call technology. In the structure of modern Western life technology forms the characteristically predominant feature. But that even this is dependent on the other is equally unmistakable. The most self-confident planner realizes that when, for example, he is drugged or becomes slipshod and reckless the counter-action of the other may become perilous to him. He must therefore try to eliminate as far as possible the danger which threatens him from the other, either by adopting compelling rules or by including the other in the pattern of his own planning, by organization. Hence we find that both these measures – directives and organization – designed to counter the factor of insecurity in human life, belong to the characteristically predominant traits in modern Western human life.

Since the degree of his control over the future depends on the success of these man-made means, the hope of modern Western man assumes a new form; it becomes hope in the increase of the means whereby his dependence and insecurity are progressively diminished and his power to determine the future correspondingly increased. It becomes therefore hope which is at the same time self-confidence, a middle term as it were between hope and self-assurance. We might describe it as hope in the basis of self-confidence. Its more familiar name is belief in progress. This belief in progress is the typical modern Western form of hope.

This hope that man will be able more and more to fashion and control his future is obviously something characteristic of modern Western humanity. Modern man is well aware of the fact that it is characteristic of him. But that it is something which distinguishes him, the modern Western human being, from the human beings of other epochs and other cultures, is a fact which he does not immediately realize but which is first brought to his notice by acquaintance with those other types of humanity, whether through historical study or through travel to other continents. The last few centuries of Western European and American history will come to be defined as the epoch of the belief in progress. This qualifying and characteristic

description urges itself upon our attention so much the more because we are already in a position to look back upon the phenomenon as a fact of past history. For as clearly as the nineteenth century marks the climax of this belief in progress, so clearly is the twentieth century the time of its rapid decline. Indeed, so far as Europe is concerned, one must perhaps already say that the belief in progress was, but no longer is, the hope of humanity in our time. The two world wars and the rise of the totalitarian state have destroyed it. They have shattered the two main pillars on which it rested, belief in technics and belief in the state and organization as the means of guaranteeing man's progressive control of his future, and in the process the belief itself has been shattered too.

There is in fact no doubt that this hope, hope based upon self-confidence, as we can only now in retrospect quite clearly perceive, was both historically and objectively a strange and unusual thing.

Historically. In no other moment of culture or epoch of history has it existed. Only in Western Europe could it arise, because there the Christian faith afforded the presupposition for its existence. And yet belief in progress as hope resting upon self-confidence is the opposite of the Christian hope, which is hope founded upon trust in God. Belief in progress was only possible in Christian Western Europe, but only because in proportion as Christian faith declined the former arose as its distortion and substitute, its parasite. For it lived on the very powers which it destroyed. And just as belief in progress replaced and inherited the Christian hope which had once prevailed in Western Europe, so now, at a time when this belief itself which had become the hope of Western Europe is dying, we are witnessing the emergence of sheer hopelessness in the form of a philosophy of despair, of the nihilistic meaninglessness of life.

But what history is thus disclosing should not in fact surprise us. For what a curious type of hope was this mixture of self-confidence and expectation! Whose hope was it in reality – this hope in progress? For whom was this progress to avail? Whose

future was here anticipated by hope and expectation? How can it irradiate my present situation, inspire my deeds, or satisfy my aspirations – the thought that at some distant date generations of mankind who are as alien to me as the ghostly inhabitants of the past will be sitting at that imaginary switchboard which will enable them to control their future? What a strange absence of mind were needed to ignore the fundamental fact which must ruin all such self-security, whether for the present or the future – the fact, namely, that all men must die! Hence was not this hope essentially only a slightly concealed hopelessness?

Or may we not perhaps have been deceiving ourselves in asserting the utter necessity and the fundamental significance of hope? Hope has not always been spoken of in favourable terms. Was it not Goethe who described the wretchedly contemptible man, the Philistine, as a useless compound of fear and hope? Does not the wisdom of the common man proclaim that he who lives on hope dies of hunger? Would it not perhaps be truer to describe hope as a form of indulgence which the really efficient man renounces because his mind is so occupied by the exigencies of the present that he has no time or interest for thoughts of the future?

In fact there are many men, and among them certainly some of the best, who are not much preoccupied with thoughts of the future, who rather take things as they come and do their duty day by day without bothering much about the shape of things to come; and again there are others who understand how to practise the *carpe diem* and thus preserve a fine humanity; and others again who, though on a higher level, take the lazzarone as their model, who lives from hand to mouth and finds his happiness in so doing. Was it not the longing for this elemental simplicity of life which drove a Gauguin to seek refuge among the primitives of the South Sea and which lies behind the noticeable leaning towards the primitive in contemporary art and literature?

But let us make no mistake! The attempt to sunder the present from the future, and to live happily in the passing moment, failed not only with Dr. Faustus. The artistic "Robinson Crusoes"

of the Western European, who has grown weary of culture, are quite understandable and often impressive as attempts to effect a return to nature, but are yet essentially only an expression of an unconfessed despair of life. The fact is that man is not so constructed as to succeed in achieving happily this return to nature, since it brings him into conflict with the deeper aspect of his humanity, which also requires realization. The gaze directed towards the future, giving birth either to longing or aim, is an essential part of the properties of this humanity. The man who in the bitterness of his disillusionment thinks he is entitled to renounce all forward-looking thoughts becomes, whether he wills it or not, whether he is aware of it or not, a traitor to the cultured humanity of Western Europe and its mission. For the truly human arises always through the process of transcendence from the given away into the non-given, from the present away into the future. We cannot revoke what we said originally about hope.

Perhaps we should distinguish between different kinds of hope. No work of man, not even the plainest, can be successfully performed without hope. The farmer sows, the mother nurses and rears her child, the responsible statesman guides and achieves – on the foundations of hope. Over all human action hovers the thought that thereby – through the performance of this particular deed – things are bettered, that it is rewarding to do the right, that the *character indelebilis* of the human is to realize the ideal. No spade, no needle, no chisel, no saw would be taken in hand if it were not permissible to believe that something good would come out of it. The picture of the future sets in motion the powers of the present, but can have this effect only through hope.

Let us then make a distinction between two kinds of hope: hope in the more sober and limited sense, implying a future so imminent and closely bound up with the present as to be hardly distinguishable from it, and, further, hope in the sense of something universal and all-embracing, gathering up the whole of life and the life of all far-reaching aims! There are small and great hopes, partial and total hopes, individual

hopes and hopes which include in their range humanity itself. But only in the former sense does hope appear to be a necessary and integral part of human existence. Hence it is that even in a time like our own, when hope in the total, comprehensive, sense is on the decline or has even utterly vanished, life nevertheless goes on its way. Peasants till their fields, workers in factories and offices, heads of departments, teachers, professors and doctors perform their tasks, the machinery of civilization continues to run; each man works energetically and with enjoyment in his particular sphere, actuated by his tiny personal hopes and ambitions, though for the most part without feeling the inspiration of any great hope, such as would embrace the future of humanity or his own individual life in its totality. We can muddle through without the help of the latter.

Yes, or can we? We must not take the answer too lightly from a casually chosen and limited sector of present human experience. By reason of the very structure of human existence it is not possible in the long run to limit our inquiries to partial aims any more than to partial causes. In the mind of man there lives a need to see things as a whole – a feature of the human consciousness which cannot be ignored. Just as an inquiry into causes cannot stop until it fathoms the ultimate, so it is with an inquiry into meaning and purpose. The question of the whither is as radical as that of the whence. Of course the individual can resign and wean himself from this pursuit of totalities and systems. But what is implied in this surrender? Does not something happen to a man who gives up what is so vital? Can humanity as a whole do what the individual can do? Can partial aims really be in the end distinctly maintained and affirmed in their partiality; do they continue to exercise their dynamic power when the sense of the totality, the universal, is lost, and are those tiny personal hopes to be properly and permanently nourished in an atmosphere of general hopelessness?

For a century now positivistic philosophy has not only expounded, but expounded with paradoxical zeal, the thesis that to renounce inquiry into ends is the mark of a culturally mature mind, With the arrogance of the learned, it has

preached to humanity metaphysical and religious abstinence. It has forgotten in the process that it was resigning only one of the two questions, that concerning ends, whereas it was urging the erudite world to pursue the inquiry into causes without setting any limits. But positivism lived in this matter – without being aware of the fact – on a rich inheritance of Christian humanistic values and meanings which deceived it as to its own poverty so long as the source lasted. In particular, positivistic philosophy was one of the main supports of an optimistic conception of progress, hence of a universal hope. In proportion as this secret Christian inheritance has become exhausted and the optimism of the idea of progress has been subjected to complete disillusionment, it has grown more and more pertinent to ask whether a life without hope is possible, whether the elimination of metaphysical and religious inquiries can be permanently maintained without surrendering life to a process of inner decadence.

In order to be able to answer the question negatively, it has been usual to refer to pre-Christian antiquity and extra-Christian cultures where it was possible to develop a high degree of enlightenment in spite of the fact that a comprehensive hope, embracing humanity as a whole and the life of the individual equally, was obviously lacking. But in this answer it is forgotten that Western man, through more than a thousand years of Christian nurture, has been accustomed to see his present existence set in the light of the future, and that, on the other hand, Christianity has destroyed mythical-metaphysical depths of meaning which can no longer be restored by a modern type of thought supposedly emancipated from the Christian faith. Hence the menace of nihilism to-day, of a despairing philosophy affirming the meaninglessness of life, is a new phenomenon in world history making the inquiry into the basis for some vital hope appear as a matter of the most immediate urgency.