PROBLEMS of the philosophy of man, and particularly the question of the relationship between the individual and society, become historically important whenever the stabilized social order begins to waver and when, together with it, the socially accepted system of values loses its stability. As long as the social machinery functions without frictions, as long as—in a marxist phrase—there is harmony between the forces and the relations of production, the individual, formed as he is by these social relations, tends to regard them as natural; and in the same way he accepts the prevailing norms of social intercourse by which his relationships with society are regulated. This is a very simple process and in most cases it takes place unconsciously since people, through their upbringing within a society and a social group, receive from society their language, a certain mode of viewing the world and of thinking and a system of values with its habits, customs and morals. It is only the collapse of the social order, the rise of objective conflicts within the base, and, consequently, in the superstructure, the upsetting and disintegration of a traditionally accepted system of values that makes the individual start considering his identity and asking about his relationships with other individuals, with society.

What makes a decent life? This is a question which, in various forms, has always faced human beings. But at times of revolution or of transition from one socio-economic system to another, when there is a breakdown in the traditional relations between the individual and society and the arduous formation of new ones, this question asserts itself with particular force. People become acutely aware that they are no longer able or willing to live in the old way, without yet knowing how they should live. Such periods encourage the individual to reflect on his status and his destiny; and they stimulate the development of a philosophy of man. Historically, these have been the periods of an ‘explosion’ of this kind of inquiry, when the Socratic current, for which man is the primary object of philosophy, has driven out the Democritean trend, a philosophy of nature for which the over-
ridding task is to investigate and formulate the general laws governing reality.

That historical conflicts play an important role in the conflicts of human consciousness—and this turns men's minds inwards—was clearly seen in the past, and is seen also today, by those thinkers to whom man and his problems are the main subject of inquiry. The doctrine of an unhappy, torn consciousness was the work of Hegel; today, in quite different conditions, his thoughts are approvingly repeated by Jean Hyppolite:

But critical periods in history are those in which the old order is already no more than semblance, and the new one has not yet emerged. These periods of transition which precede revolution are also periods of spiritual dilemma. The dialectic reaches the mind only as a negative dialectic. Its positive side, which is the opposite of the negative, has yet to be perceived. Since the time of Hegel attention has been repeatedly drawn to the crises preceding the great changes in the field of accepted values. But Hegel's analysis seems to us particularly original for its time.*

More than a century ago, in 1845—when Marx was working on his first writings—Soren Kierkegaard observed in his diary that periods preceding great changes see the appearance of men who, like certain birds which announce the coming of rain, are capable of predicting the imminent social storm.* According to Hans Schoeps this can apply to many thinkers of that period (and, let me add, certainly to Marx), who, long before their contemporaries, correctly foresaw the crisis of the age and the breakdown of the existing system of values. These sentiments were surely expressed most forcefully and with an admirable clarity by a contemporary observer of events, Alexis de Tocqueville:

It is obvious to me that those who for sixty years have been predicting the end of the revolution, are in error. It is quite clear today that the waves are still rising, and the last dams are threatened by the sea; that not only have we not seen the end of that powerful revolution which began before we were born but it is also probable that a child today receiving his first glimpse of the light of the day will not see it either. What is involved is no longer a change, but a complete transformation of the social system. Where is the world heading? Frankly, I do not know and I think that this is beyond the minds of all of us. We only know that the old world is drawing to an end. What will the new world be like? Even the greatest minds of our time are unable to tell, just as the minds of the ancients could not foresee the end of slavery, the advent of the Christian world, the invasion of the barbarians and all those things which have changed the face of the globe.*

These words—written by Tocqueville to a friend in 1850—vividly convey the state of mind of those people who were then concerned with the question of the individual and his relationship with a rapidly changing society. And their name was legion.

It was precisely this problem, under the comprehensive name of humanism, which was the dominant note in the circles in which Karl Marx moved and which in a sense fashioned his attitudes. Feuerbach, Moses Hess, Bruno Bauer, Max Stirner and many others, including the young Marx, are all preoccupied with this question which they regard as of the utmost importance: how can man who has been turned into a slave of his alienated products be made the independent creator of his destiny? how to ensure a full and unrestricted development of his personality? how to create the most favorable conditions of human happiness and to transform human existence into something in keeping with the ideal of man, with his ‘essence’ (or, in the language of those days, to transform the real man into the true man)?

On closer inspection the problems then tackled by the proponents of humanistic tendencies prove to be still extremely relevant. Here is man faced by an alienated world in which his products—in the field of economy, politics, ideology (particularly religion) and social life (particularly the family)—are acquiring a certain independence; they no longer submit to the individual’s power and will, but, on the contrary, begin to dominate and subjugate him. Like the devil’s disciple, man has unleashed forces which he is unable to control. Hence the need to transform this inhuman world, in which things are masters of men, into a human world—a world of free human beings who are architects of their destiny and to whom man is the supreme good. A humanism of this kind is a theory of happiness. The prime objective is to make people happy, to make them capable of happiness.

In taking up these problems Marx was in no way breaking new ground: nor was he isolated in his endeavors. On the contrary, in Lenin’s fine phrase, he was following the broad highway of the issues and thoughts of his age. This was one of the reasons for his greatness and one of the sources of his relevance today; it explains why he seems so close to us when we ask these questions in our own conditions. For while the problems studied by the young Marx and his contemporaries had a wider historical validity, reaching far back into the past, it was then that they made themselves particularly felt. It was obvious to everybody—and the memories of the French Revolution were a painful reminder—that the old world was drawing to an end. The new world was still emergent, revealing and aggravating the basic contradictions in the process. The old system of values had collapsed and the new system was in a formative stage, asserting itself amid a host of conflicts. The problem of the individual—lost and craving stability, oppressed and pining for freedom, exploited and longing to live a full life, rent and thirsting for happiness—stood out more sharply than ever in clear and vivid relief. It became the salient question of an age of change and revolution.
And it is this which makes these issues touch so sensitive a chord today, in a situation which is different but similar, in an age of incomparably sharper conflicts and contradictions which are, however, analogous to the old ones.

Marx and his contemporaries—Kierkegaard among them—asked questions about human existence and advanced various humanist programs because this existence was clearly threatened and because society obviously demanded answers to certain problems. Hegel wrote that no philosophy can go beyond the limits of its age—an idea which can also be phrased differently; each philosophy, and certainly philosophy which is not without response, provides answers to some topical questions and problems. This is why problems of the individual are also tackled by us today in a variety of philosophical guises and why the young Marx's work seems so much in tune with our own reflections.

The domination of anthropological themes in modern philosophy arises out of the demand for answers concerning human existence at a time when this existence is in danger and when, at the watershed between two formations, the traditional system of values has been undermined. On this point there is a consensus of opinion among all students of the subject who are otherwise very far apart, if not diametrically opposed, in their philosophical convictions.

Here is the view of a communist, Roger Garaudy:

The two world wars have had a decisive influence on the formation and development of the philosophy of existence. Above all, it was largely due to them that all philosophies—atheist existentialism; Christian philosophy, marxism—had to become philosophies of existence because the foundations of human existence had been questioned and the answer could no longer be delayed. There is no modern, living philosophy which does not reflect this situation of man, the situation of all men, enmeshed as they are in general conflicts and unknown destinies, facing a continuous threat of death, experiencing a fear generalised on the scale of the events which engender it.*

And at the other pole of philosophy we find Martin Buber who, in my view, has provided one of the most interesting analyses of the subject—all the more interesting as it was formulated before the outbreak of the second world war, and thus before its consequences for man's situation in the world today were known. In *Le probleme de l'homme* Buber speaks of ebbs and flows in anthropological thought which depend on man's sense of isolation. If an explanation were added of the source of this isolation and the reason why man feels 'without hearth or home' in a rapidly changing world in which human relations and their underlying

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systems of values are subject to revolutionary changes, one could fully agree with this diagnosis.

But it is only in our times, says Buber, that the anthropological problem has fully matured. He thinks that—apart from the evolution and crystallization of philosophical thought in general—this is due to two factors.

First comes the sociological factor: the disintegration of the traditional forms of human society, such as the family, the rural and urban community, etc., which are a result of the bourgeois revolution.

Secondly—and this is in my view the most interesting part of his argument—man has lost control over the world he has himself created—the phenomenon which Marx once called, after Hegel, alienation.

This concerns the relationship between man and the objects and relations which arose out of his activity or with his participation. Man lets himself be overtaken by his own works—here is exactly how I would describe this particular feature of the modern crisis. Man is no longer in a position to take in the world created by his own activity; this world is getting the upper hand of him, slipping out of his hands, opposing him in all its elementary independence, and man no longer knows the magic word which could cast a spell over the man-made Golem and make him harmless.*

His wording may be different, but Buber is referring to the same developments that preoccupied the young Marx and his contemporaries when they analysed the status of the individual in relation to the great upheavals of their age. And he is discussing the same things when speaking of technology, economics and politics as the main domains in which the ascendancy of man-made things and relations over man is revealed.

In Buber's analysis the problem is placed in particularly sharp relief in the case of politics—in the light of the experiences of World War I. Naturally, his words take no account of the appalling experience of the second world war and its aftermath, or of the atomic sword of Damocles now hanging over mankind.

And so man found himself confronted with a sinister fact: he was giving life to demons which he could not then subjugate. What was the meaning of this power which was at the same time powerless? The problem was reduced to the question about the nature of man, which was acquiring a new, supremely practical significance.*

And this is surely where the essence of the problem lies: in our days philosophical anthropology has acquired a practical meaning. It explains why such inquiries exploded after the first world

*M. Buber, op. cit., p. 60.
war, and even more after the second—an interesting socio-psychological phenomenon emphasised by both Buber and Garaudy. In the twenties Martin Heidegger summed up the position in these pointed words:

In no age before has so much knowledge about man been accumulated and never has it been so diversified. But in no age before have we known less about man. In no period before has man been the object of so many questions as in our time.*1

Symptoms of alienation have long been present in society—probably ever since the inception of social life—but never have they been so drastic and powerful as they are today in all possible forms: economic, political, social, and ideological. Human existence has always been, throughout history, subject to various dangers, but never before has this threat acquired such tremendous dimensions and never has it been fraught with such terrifying consequences for the existence of mankind as today.

And, naturally, in the past, too, systems of values have been rocked. But never before has this been so universal and far-reaching as today when in one part of the world the conviction is growing that the old systems of values, though publicly venerated, have outlived themselves and are no longer of use, while in the other part men are harassed by a situation in which new systems have not yet been consolidated and thus are not yet as useful as they should be.

Small wonder then that the individual feels threatened, insecure, frightened, that he does not feel organically united with society and, consequently, feels lonely and isolated. These are normal things at a time of change and of a weakening of human relations. But it is also normal that in such periods man tends to wonder about himself and to ponder questions which are otherwise hardly noticed; it is at such times that the role and importance of philosophical anthropology grows considerably. In Buber's fine words:

In the history of the human spirit I distinguish ages when man has a home and those in which he is homeless. In the former he inhabits the world like a house, in the latter he lives in the world as in an open field, sometimes even without the four pegs necessary to put up a tent. In the former anthropological thought is only part of cosmological thinking, in the latter it becomes profound, and thus independent.*

It is precisely at such a historical juncture—when men live in society not as in a house but as in an open field—that our world has found itself today; particularly since the second world war and the beginning of the atomic age.