

A Philosopher of Nonviolence

Aldo Capitini

Introduction, by Ornella Pompeo Faracovi

*We are at the moment experiencing renewed interest in the life and work of Aldo Capitini, the Italian philosopher of nonviolence, who was born in Perugia in 1899 and died there in 1968. Conferences, publications, and meetings are drawing the Italian public's attention to his pure lifestyle, deeply marked first by the courageous choice to oppose fascism, then by the long period during which he was marginalized by the university world and official culture; but attention has also been drawn to his numerous writings (from his *Elementi di una esperienza religiosa*, published in 1937 at the height of the fascist regime, with the help of Benedetto Croce, to *Religione aperta*, one of the last books to be placed on the Index by the Catholic Church, and finally the essay *Attraverso due terzi del secolo*, which appeared posthumously in Guido Calogero's journal *La Cultura*), and to his tireless activity as the driving force behind movements and initiatives (it was Capitini, amongst others, who organised the first peace march from Perugia to Assisi in 1961).*

As far as philosophy is concerned, Capitini's contribution is in the field of distinction between actions and values, which in the 1930s had already set him in opposition to any idea originating from the historicism or political realism which were dominant at the time in Italian culture. From there he derived the idea that reality should not be accepted at face value, but that it should be continually measured against values, and subjected to an initiative which is used to move it towards values. The process of transforming actions which begins in this way is not, however, necessarily and only carried on in great works and visible and extravagant historical action. It is also, and above all else, expressed in everyday behaviour, in apparently small and insignificant acts which are also accessible to those who have neither power nor influence, to the humble and the losers; in the world of affects, feelings, and thoughts, every time that someone is able to question the apparent intangibility of the primacy of influence, success, and results, the static character and the alleged inviolability of institutions, the violence which so often permeates the world of men. The development of this idea gives rise to Capitini's own individual approach to nonviolence, the rejection of lying, of murder (expressions for which he suggested substituting the compound terms non-violence, non-lying, and non-murder which he coined himself, in order to emphasise their positive, rather than negative, character), understood as a method of behaviour, and also revised in the light of his meditation on work developed in India by Mahatma Gandhi.

*This ethico-political vision is based on a few key words belonging to Capitini's philosophical vocabulary, which it is worth briefly recalling and discussing by way of introduction to a reading of his writings. The most important term is 'persuasion', which as early as Carlo Michelstaedter's work *La persuasione e la retorica* (1910), indicated the state of being of an individual aware of his own unequivocal responsibility towards himself and his actions, as compared with someone who allows himself to absorb accepted ideas and the domination of what is given. The term 'more'*

is introduced to indicate the character of an action which opposes the world of deeds, adding something more to them with respect to values. The adjective 'religious' is often added to characterize the attitude of those who carry out their moral duty by transcending the world of actions with respect to recognized and rationally defined values: that is, in relation to the completely secular religion of Capitini, a merciless critic of institutionalized religions, resolutely opposed to the Catholic hierarchy, and philosophically very close, on these subjects, to the themes in Kant's work *Religion within the Boundaries of Pure Reason*. And finally – although it is only mentioned in passing and not specifically dealt with in the pages which are reproduced here – the term 'compresence', to indicate the connection constructed between all men, both living and dead, at that moment when they present themselves as moral subjects, in contrast with the given reality, and acting as members of an ideal community, which calls for a new effort to bring about the rule of Kantian goals.

Until now, the texts in which this rich, complex, articulate, and difficult thinking is expressed have only been available in Italian. We present here to the international public, for the first time in translation, a selection of pages, intended to develop some of the central themes of Capitini's philosophy and his theory of nonviolence. They are taken from *Vita religiosa* (1942), now in *A. Capitini, Scritti filosofici e religiosi*, Perugia 1998,² and from *La nonviolenza oggi*, published in Milan in 1962.

Bibliography of Aldo Capitini's key works:

Elementi di un'esperienza religiosa, (1937) with an introduction by Norberto Bobbio, Cappelli, 1990; *La nonviolenza oggi*, Comunità, 1962; *Antifascismo tra i giovani*, Celebes, 1966; *Le tecniche della nonviolenza*, Milan: Feltrinelli, 1967; *Educazione aperta*, 2 vols., La Nuova Italia, 1967–1968; *Il potere di tutti* (1969), with an introduction by Norberto Bobbio and a preface by Pietro Pinna, Guerra 1999; *Il messaggio di Aldo Capitini. Antologia degli scritti*, G. Cacioppo (ed.), Lacaia 1977; *Scritti sulla nonviolenza*, Luisa Schippa (ed.), Protagon 1992; *Scritti filosofici e religiosi*, M. Martini (ed.), Centro Studi A. Capitini 1998.

Working in the world¹

Each and every one of us, wherever we may be in the world, and whatever our way of life and behaviour, has within us the possibility of spiritual life: everyone is, more or less, as a result of his growth and good faith, aware; everyone is capable of understanding art, thought, human passions, moral and social problems, and of experiencing them. All of humanity belongs unconditionally to history; as I see it, moral effort can reside in anyone, just as it resides in me when I try hard to find the best in every action, sometimes sacrificing myself. It is good that I cannot say: the mind reaches a certain point, and can go no further; that is why I often do go further than mankind and concentrate on creatures that are not human, the animals and plants which are always around me. And then it seems to me that life and historical development extend as far as these beings who live and act, and I hope that it will get better and better. But of course, when I think of the possible acts of Goodness, Justice, Beauty, and Thought, mankind is capable of much more in the way of higher feelings and social construction.

Life is a constant search for, and discovery of, these values (which are often justly written with capital letters: Beauty, Goodness, Justice). When one lives according to these

values, when one is passionately interested in artistic beauty, goodness, justice in society, a higher moral ideal, a feeling and a noble and passionate enthusiasm, truth and the most coherent mental organization, one no longer asks what these values are for or why one is alive. They are like grace which comes to us, and which affect even those who wish to shut themselves up: we work in order to achieve these values, and when they appear, they seem to transcend our wretchedness, we feel as humble as we would before a gift, and if we ourselves have done this deed, we say: it was God who inspired and supported me; when others have done the deed, we say: these are men chosen by God, Dante, Mazzini, Saint Francis, Leopardi, or anybody else; but then we speak about an 'angel' of goodness. The more we love these values, the more the mystery of life disappears: someone who loves does not ask himself why he loves.

Could these values perhaps be piled up, like grain in a silo? What would complete and abstract artistic Beauty be, without an actual work of art? What would total and abstract goodness be, without an individual act of goodness by an actual person whom we can look at in delight? Thus it is necessary to act: that is, we must produce and criticize, create and revise, speak and listen. One without the other cannot form the basis of value. In the same way, a government which is not subject to control, or criticism which would be able to correct it, becomes an evil regime, like the one described in Manzoni's *I Promessi Sposi* (*The Betrothed*). Production and criticism, responsibility and freedom, these are the foundations of real human activity, which comes from man as conscience and moral centre. For centuries so much of the effort of civilizations has been concentrated on this point: making progress and experiencing life in which one becomes more and more aware that it is right to give pride of place to conscience, the inner decision with which we face life in good faith (though often deserted by everyone as though we were in the desert): whoever renounces conscience, that sacred complex of thought and feeling, easily lays themselves open to tyrants and every kind of evil.

These values, these ideals, *do not result from actions but reach out towards them*, and have a tendency to modify them, ennoble them, and if the actions do not respond at once or turn against us, the soul still continues to be right, although it sees that the actualization of its own ideals and the result of so much work do not correspond. There is no adverse situation in which nothing else can be done. But would the guarantee of a personal ideal be found in immediate success? History is made by those who, when they have worked out a profound ideal according to the best of their ability and with all their soul, use a thousand different ways of making it reality. For example, I may be in the process of writing a poem, which will perhaps not be of great value. But the more labour, life, and love that I put into this work, even though it has no artistic value, the greater the new benefit which will be created in my soul, and in the souls of those around me and who have seen and, as it were, heard me working. Do I want to achieve an ideal of social improvement, while the authorities do not respond, but make fun of me, and arrest me? But if one actually lives this ideal, even though it does not produce an immediate political or social victory, it does produce, in me and in others, moral acts, goodness and an elevation of the spirit, works of art, thoughts and new feelings, and is therefore able to pave the way and prepare for more complex and lasting social achievements, even if they are not effected immediately.

Each decision that I take, each reflection that I make, constitutes me as a centre of responsibility. It is an initiative that I take, an objection in which I am involved, a cosmic

scream which tears the fabric of actions. When other people, events, and success are in conflict with the agenda that is imposed on me at that moment by history and my reasoning, I am the living soul of this agenda.

If it should happen that matters of heaven are mixed up with those of the earth, in scientific, astronomical, or meteorological terms, as a result of some action; or that a man demonstrated to me, as a result some of his feats, real powers opposed to my strength, I would not be able to submit unequivocally to the law which, after the upheavals of actions, would come from the sky or from the miraculous man. I would say: go on, show your strength; but what I have to achieve can only come from my conscience, from my decision. It is in being convinced of the good, and not in your threats or your miraculous deeds, that I find the proof of my duty. I set up societies, I participate in institutions, and I receive them from history so that they can, with all their might, help me to bring about the good which lies in liberation from evil. I would go even further: I love them, for although, childishly, I delight in the sound of thunder and in flashes of lightning, and although I am very happy to take part in the numerous marvellous aspects which actions present, nevertheless, as a mature man, I revere societies, institutions, and groups of people who created a custom, a wish, or a plan, who gathered together and aroused soul and passion, and I know the pain and the effort that man experiences in order to construct them. But sometimes what strikes me is the merciless character of nature, and that flood waters can cover a rock just as easily as the face of a small child; I also often think that there are times when a human institution is at fault; and in every case, I always have only one duty: to take the initiative. To set myself up as consciously as possible in the centre of humanity, facing the flood waters and the institutions which defend those actions which, in all conscience, I would not want to see exist.

My decision presupposes that it should be possible to see something positive in what I affirm, a value to defend, a responsibility. Even in the way I keep myself alive, by eating and sleeping, I recognize and affirm that this is how I must act, and that I must defend it. At this point, at this moment this action and this affirmation take place; then I will move on to others, just as in ten years time I will wear clothes which are different from those that I am wearing now; but that does not detract from the fact that today I am wearing these clothes and that today I shall eat, even though I shall have to eat again tomorrow. One cannot do everything, there is no action which would encompass everything; one has to accomplish one action after another, this is what constitutes its absolute character: that I must do this particular action, here and now. Would that be tiresome? Would you like to give up that responsibility, that is to say the fact that you must here and now complete this particular action and not another? But then you would lose freedom of decision and infinity of conscience, contained completely within the possibility, both cheerful and difficult, of making a decision.

Historical transformations

For the moral person, on whom the identity of the citizen is built, today's problems and demands present themselves as so many striking reassessments: we live at a time when tradition is dying and decisions which come from universal responsibility can arise. The first forty years of the twentieth century saw the end of one group of problems and

European customs (national renaissances; cultural traditions which proved to have reached the end of their cycle; peaceful co-existence between various parties, religions, and sects); global themes and apostolic customs are now appearing. Responsibilities and problems are increasing: the things to fight are painful and even horrific; power, cruelty, lies, and evils are attaining a frightening size. From the inclinations of our bodies, for example the smoking habit and sensuality, to the tough and all-powerful social world, man today confronts and endures almost insurmountable difficulties. And what is even more tiring in the face of the social world is the effectiveness and range of modern mechanical means which give increased power to the powerful; and the amorphous mass of the crowds who hardly listen and make a great deal of noise is growing, obeying facile formulae and idolizing those who flatter their failings. The balance and the exchange between thought and action are becoming blurred.

There are, therefore, two solutions: either to sink, that is to say, to allow things to continue as they are, making compromises, accepting defeat, and giving in to melancholy and emptiness, or else to muster the forces of the moral centre. This second solution, which is that of every free man, could engender a new stoicism through which man could demonstrate his moral strength, his 'independence as opposed to chance' (as Foscolo said), by resisting evil, resisting tyrants and scruffy mobs, by making himself as solid as a rock. But there is something sad about that; how can that sadness be overcome? How can one cure a society which would fall into decadence if the best of its members had to pull out in order to save themselves? Internal solitude has to be accepted whilst waiting; it is an action which has to be accomplished, at least for a moment; anyone who does not achieve it cannot liberate himself. Whether it be a decision to get married or to support an ideal, all deliberation entails a moment of solitude, and it is good that this is so; is this not better than submitting to an exterior force which continually gives us orders? And this internal solitude is no longer solitude when it is always aspiring, through constantly repeated effort, to ordinary life. One way or another, we belong to historical and social complexes, to legal relationships, we are caught in a game of wills, and we can always participate or not participate; but even without participating, we remain in society. Man must account for the creative freedom which he possesses deep within himself, he must recapture it when it seems to escape from him and defend it if others attack it. He should affirm his own humanity in concrete terms and his own thought and soul in active terms. Expression of oneself is a supreme duty and right, a development which is a liberation, on a higher level than practical considerations. There are many people who do not know that the administrative side of life (order, well-being) can, if necessary, be eliminated if a deep-seated reason of conscience demands it. One eats to live, rather than living to eat; to live, one does not have to destroy the reasons of conscience which make life acceptable.

In living, I constantly modify my situation in order to better it, I look after my body in order to enjoy a certain physical strength, I think and I act in order to influence circumstances, to search and discover continually and to develop my life. That is what it means to work for freedom. But one must beware of the fact that in us and in others, freedom does not stop, nor does it become an accessory and nothing else. I am fully aware that my freedom is active, and increases, through everything which reassures the human soul and resolves the problems surrounding it. Just as the heart has to beat continually in order to live, so freedom has to add new work; freedom has to develop and new problems need to

be resolved. And these problems exist, whether we look towards the plains of Asia, the hills of Umbria, or the towns of America.

Gratitude

What absolute distinction can I draw between the following quotations? 'Much will be forgiven you because you have loved much' (Jesus Christ); 'Moral law inevitably humiliates everyone if they compare that law with the sensitive tendency of their nature' (Kant); 'The story of humanity is, in essence, nothing more than the story of God and of the Virgin Mary, (De Sanctis); 'Poetry is a conference with God; eloquence is a conference with men' (Croce); 'All virtue, all good comes from Him and not from his creation, and nobody can boast in His presence' (St Francis); 'You cannot become less wretched if you do not better yourself' (Mazzini).

Although the historical situations may be different, I, for my part, see things in the same way; all these quotations are in deep harmony with my soul and my heart pounds when I hear them. As my life unfolds, they seem to grow and *become more true*, especially those which are designed less to make a fortune in the world and rather more to love more, to have faith, not to be discouraged, but to show oneself strong in the face of temptation and to find comfort in pain and clarity in the spirit. So far I have talked of the moral and social life of those who are responsibly aware, I have introduced the divine essence of being, the 'more' of religion; well, what I have said about values and the hereafter is confirmed by these quotations and I find them actually composed of the same substance as that internal heaven which looks at and illuminates the hectic life of this world: they are truly real. I cannot differentiate in any way between these quotations (except with reference to the different situations in which I find myself and in which they were said). It is not only inevitable that I should form in my soul a sort of affection and respect for those who uttered them, but I feel it rather to be a duty, for these expressions are born of a situation which my conscience has experienced, they have sprung from a drama, a fatigue, a tension; as far as I am concerned, I internalize within myself those who have lived and experienced them, I am as attentive as I can be to them and grateful, and I reciprocate their friendly tone. (But I could cite quotations by these same people which have nothing to do with the development of my innermost self, which therefore resists them and does not agree with them; and apart from such quotations, I could also think of actions by these people, known or unknown, which I personally would not want to commit).

These sentiments resonate in my soul with what actually aspires to the good in an ensemble of humanity and civilized behaviour, a clear circle in which there is no need for miracles or mysteries. The same thing applies to certain acts which result from the religion into which I was born; sometimes these acts combine with others that I would call secular. On saint's day mornings, in bed, I hear the ancient bells of certain well-known churches, and I am seized by an inexpressible emotion which calls up so many memories in my life. But though I might conjure up a certain street which I loved as a child, or go back into the cemetery in my town, or when I see again the crest of the mountains, or hear a certain voice, or listen to the opening bars of the Fifth Symphony again, those things are just so many impressions which move me and, sometimes, almost seem to be

asking me something. One of them affects me more, one less, but there is no clear-cut difference. And even less so between objects, between those which are called sacred and the others. Only one difference is absolute, and on that score I cannot compromise: it is the one which establishes good faith, sincerity, the moral requirements of the present moment, whether to participate or not. That is why, even though I condemn the declarations or the actions of those whom I spoke about earlier and which are not in keeping with my present demands, I do not, for example, accept the allegiance to the pontiff of Rome made by St Francis, although his care of the sick and his wish to reassure the soul penetrates the heaven of my conscience; those are the impressions which come back to me: I struggle against those which conjure up sin and, disarmed, I lie open to others; as far as objects are concerned, only those which could serve as a means for the actions of which I disapprove, in all conscience, only those appear to me to be secular and strange. Consequently, those things made sacred by tradition and the world around me come to blend in with the scope of the life of the moral conscience.

But the religious element, real and personal, appears suddenly when, in the presence of these impressions or people, or of these emotions conjured up by deeds and objects, I turn my gaze towards my own small person marked by its finitude, towards its anxiety to know why, to search ever more deeply for what can sometimes be bitterness and sometimes devotion of the soul, as if it were once more becoming *piccioletta che sa nulla*² again. Then one of these phrases, or a deed or an object seem to call out to me, and I turn towards a religious hereafter, as if there were a voice there calling me, to comfort my heart. In this 'more', without saying so, I feel *grateful to that which* calls to me. How unfortunate I would be if none of those words were able to strike a chord in my soul, if no deed stirred me! I really have been called to something, and I respond with enthusiasm and something more, something which exceeds the everyday moral life. From the depths of my being, I say: for me, reality transforms itself into a saint's day, my person is able to devote itself to something. Instead of superstition and magic, I invoke this 'more' which comes from inside me and I offer it to what resonates with it, and I see it as a specific sign which is addressed to me as a person; in that state of bitterness, or anxiety, or inertia, or defiance in which I used to be, these words, this emotion, this particular object, have called me; the sacred is celebrated through the offering of my heart, which makes a saint's day of it. Gratitude is a saint's day.

Not that I despise the world or its realities and results. Certainly, I am saddened that justice does not win, and that in a given situation the reign of a tyrant is imposed; this fact is as it is, with the pain that it produces for the moral conscience; but I remain grateful for having the concept of justice in my soul, even if it does not win on this occasion. I am really sad that this poem which I have worked on for days has not succeeded; but I am grateful for the aesthetic conscience which gives me the ability to judge severely a page which has not succeeded. 'A thing of beauty is a joy for ever', as Keats said; but the same also applies to an ideal of freedom, of justice, of a truth and also of an emotion, of an object, when in all these things, something in my innermost self shows its gratitude, as if I were saying: I was waiting for you so that I could give myself to you, so that I could offer you all the sincerity of my human soul. 'For ever', as one says in the joy of gratitude. And my gratitude is without shadow, because I am sure that there is not one being, not one facet of reality where this appeal does not appear, and where a 'more' of gratitude could not be actualized and added to the deeds of the worlds.

At the centre of work there are people

Slowly, up to the present time, the history of humanity has authoritatively acquired certain moral positions and we internalize human history, a history of developing morality; traditions, laws, certain souls of great nobility represent a heritage which we do not reject, and which we therefore continually cause to flourish, which we discuss and so create our present action. The whole world works more or less like this; are we required to work? History is interrogated through customs, laws, and examples: a decision is taken. Certainly, there are those whose horizons are more limited, as, for example, a man of the people who does not detail all the stages of moral development which lead to monogamy, and in this case the main burden is placed on the institutions, laws, examples (and myths) which surround him, setting him on his way to interpreting his marriage. A more educated man is better able to understand how things have reached a certain point, even if the result and his decision turn out to be the same as those of the man of the people. Both are able to escape from customs and break new ground, that is to say, follow an inspiration which seems to be sincerely their own, and a better one than customs, the norm, and established law. A man is a man because he can obey and create; that is what his life consists of at any given moment. And a man of the people can be worth more than an educated man because, within his culture's limited horizon, he can put more good faith and sincerity towards himself into his decision; whilst the educated man, with all his knowledge of the history of moral problems, can show himself weak and deceitful towards himself. Just as poetry is based on feeling, but is elevated when given form by the rules of polite society, so moral life is based on sincerity, but is elevated when it is backed up by conscience.

What every man, as a moral centre, must do to base himself on his conscience, cannot be an act of closure. All attempts by sociality, morality, and religion aim purely and simply to prevent this act of self-closure by conscience, and rather enrich it with new elements; when conscience turns in on itself too much and isolates itself, we see that sociality becomes violent, and religion now has a revelatory function, to penetrate that shell. On the other hand, in decision-making, the more conscience listens to problems, considers itself capable of making errors, and thus makes an effort to pose doubts, to make no distinction between events, to listen and to discuss, the more easily are egoism, dogmatism, and social tyranny overcome; then an ever-expanding inner morality springs up, open-minded and not for ever destined to defend the past. Each time we feel the desire to say that we have acted according to our conscience, we should ask ourselves if it was closed, and thus failed to consider so many elements which thought and circumstances themselves had summoned up.

The idea that a man's decision springs from the infinite nature of his conscience, and that intention, the value of an action which counts as good faith, and the enthusiasm that the soul gives him are inherent there, brings me back to the subject of freedom. I and others, we are free in our moral effort, and what counts is the inspiration which everyone puts into it, at a given moment. I will never know exactly how much morality there is in my actions and in those of others, for I and others will never be able to put an end to drama, search, and enthusiasm; it is precisely this search and this enthusiasm which allows me to locate the evil and say: if I had acted in this way, I would have made a mistake, I would have committed a sin, I must not do it. It is a never-ending struggle between the more and the less: the best that one can achieve is the next level up, and it

must be achieved. And that is how one sees, little by little, how the anxiety of everyday life, pleasure for pleasure's sake, and reduction to a mindless state are defeated, by overcoming commitment to such things by a moral act.

It is true that each of our actions has repercussions on us, on our bodies and our souls (for every action also changes our bodies); it has repercussions on everything and everybody, because each of our actions is rooted in reality; this thought can sometimes keep us from sin, but at other times it cannot, since there is so much violence in our decision. We are convinced, by our history and our development, that it is wrong to do certain things, that in the union between our own personal heaven and our bodies which brings about actions, such an action would cast a shadow over things and would cause pain; however, in us and in others close to us, we can see the fall. I know that I am free inside, that if I make an effort I can install the good, and yet I do not find the strength to do it, and thus I am disheartened; this defeat of my freedom and moral strength is a sin: then why, if my will is free, does it not make the maximum effort? Therefore, two ways divide men: they do wrong lawfully and start a low and inhuman life, like Semiramis, the queen whom Dante wrote about, and who, in order not to be blamed for her vices, decreed that there was nothing wrong in them (as if kings or their subjects could change certain conclusions of the moral history of humanity!); or else they remain aware of the wrong and thus fall, suffer, and groan inwardly.

In the soul of every man who is really a man, there is a constant drama unfolding all the time, and it is not enough just to know that remorse, doubt, pain, and despair are present throughout life and can also change from negative to positive.

'You have come into the world? You want to work? Well, you will encounter obstacles and defeats. That is life; would you want the sun to rise and not cast a shadow, for there to be no darkness in the same way as there is light?'

I know all that, but it is not enough, there is something else. There is an individual, this man and not any other, at the very moment of his drama, totally defined in time and space; from that solemn unity which includes everything, from that inevitable law which explains everything, from that historical totality which absorbs everything in its development, in the name of a god who does not destroy, I turn my gaze towards my own birth and that of others, I measure myself against this limited being. But I do not want to judge it, I do not want to define the place of that action in the framework of history; I approach this individual unequivocally, his drama and his pain, I am company for him. I see the person in the action, the soul that has come to the light to fight, and I say to him, watching the drama that is his: you are.

As I see it, there is an indelible religious act which has no need of support, which does not require one to close one's eyes to the rest of life, which is not a myth in the imaginary sense of the word, but reality: it is man (and others), with his drama, whom presence comes to meet, saying: you. Even the man who is unaware of it reaches out to it, to affirm a disinterested you, born of presence, of total love; at all times, in all speeches and in all human thoughts, whether implicitly or explicitly, there has been a 'you' addressed to oneself or to someone else, a passionate insistence towards that. Today, that tragic passion which sees so many things finish and change, and so many men swept away and seized by activist fury, is concentrated in this 'you', more intimate than noise or movement ('you are and I am near you, here'). The religious eye surveys the extraordinary man, in his drama, in his limitations; and this change protects against mythology.

Creatures

When I consider the world of things and people contained within my experience, I notice that life takes on varying aspects, from the white page to the black ink, from the animal to my fellow man, each living its own life. So I am happy to start considering things one by one, and to see how they all have their own individual existence. It is extremely important to me to make this examination *one by one*, for in this way I feel close to things and beings. I am not interested in the canine species (as it is described in zoology books), but much, much more in that particular dog there; living, and also dead, just as I and others remember it; even dead, the individual interests me more than the species. And the same goes for a machine, an engine, what interests me is that engine there, in its individuation, much more than the description of how it functions, in mechanics textbooks.

The impossibility of working

The impossibility of working has made a deep impression on me, especially since the time when, at a certain period in my life, I tried it out on myself (importantly, I got more out of doing this than I could ever have gained by working, studying, or reading). Seeing others going about their own work, producing, increasing their knowledge and honing their judgement, but yet remaining inactive, going round and round in circles, empty! And I have come to understand the limits of my civil activity, for acts really have some value, achieve something, a poem as a thing of beauty, a house as a place to live, but what about people?

It was precisely at this moment that I really moved closer to people, seeing them trapped in the danger of not-doing, and I have been cured for ever of the scholastic way of only understanding people as the bearers of works and masterpieces. That is where my religion was born.

Religion is a plus added to conscience and to working. When I work and I am totally absorbed by work, I aim for content; if, for example, I build a house, I take care, I think about it, I bring it into existence, I start by drawing it, then I build it brick by brick. When I bring up a son, I go shopping for food for him, I call the doctor for him, bath him, throw him up into the air to make him even happier. The house, the child, the written page, these are the contents of my action; and in that, I realise and deny myself (because I do not look at myself) at the same time, and that gives rise to anxiety when I see that the house, the child, or the page are in danger. But even though these things disintegrate and do not succeed, I on the other hand, as a form of working and of life, do not become negative as such: the form is always positive; all that indicates is that the problem changes, and that I must do something different. To be convinced of the positivity of the form is the fundamental morality in every man, and without that he really would be an atheist. Indeed, moving from one content to another is difficult, for one always becomes attached to whatever one devotes time to. Contents are the world, and it is for them that one must work, without which there is no sense in talking about action; but positivity, which is not of this world because it is infinite, is form and conscience. And if I should become blind: it would be painful not to be able to see all those things any longer, to abandon so much work, but the form which can give rise to new acts of

life remains: the spirit gives me other possibilities, and what really counts is not the number of things that I can do, but the quality, the tone, and, though blind, I am still rich in the sincerity and passion of my soul. The ancient adage said: know thyself! The modern commandment is: be yourself, fulfil your potential, and I can do that even if I am blind. It is just the contents and the opportunities which change, and I can reassure myself by taking as a moral rule that, from now on, I must think of their form: I have done what I had to, as well as I possibly could. It is not the world which judges, or the index of national production, the number of books read or of houses built: there is a judgement which is spiritual form, at the moment in which one lives, the here and now, and it makes one think about the life one leads, because it can also be good in meditating, in groping one's way.

To this positivity I add religion: it is thanks to religion that I can accept the impossibility of working, I live it, I suffer it, and I become really close, and not just in words, to those who are like me. I am close to those who cannot work, I feel an infinite proximity with them and I enter into their deep innerness; far from being with those who act just for the sake of acting, I am with those who cannot work, those who are suffering or have at least suffered something. For this extra enthusiasm, I will pay the price with impossibility, failures, feelings of repulsion from which I have suffered on and off for a long time, as a person, when I obeyed what the spirit then called me to do. This absolute proximity with unfortunate people would not be able to exist if I did not give it this religious extra, through an initiative which comes from the centre of myself, from the depths of suffering experienced in the flesh, in a situation which has become inimical to me.

And I see that personality often frees itself from its limits in fact and lives in the infinity and absoluteness of moral strength; but why does it have nothing? Why, when the soul leaps forward and becomes devoted, giving in to an infinite and impassioned abandon, does the 'world' often only respond with disdain? Why, when one feels that life, whether it has been with yourself or with the person that one has dreamed of loving, should be 'similar to that which in heaven approaches God' (as Leopardi says³), and yet you make no reply? Some people do not want to be either higher or lower, but to stay at the same level, speaking and listening, looking at the profile of the beloved, and the world does not allow them that. Why does one particular individual have less intelligence, less good luck, less beauty, less power? This man, it is true, does what he has to, develops his life according to the values of work and goodness, but that is not enough for me; I go beyond his destitute state, I go down to the level of the man who has nothing, I deny the absolute value of intelligence, health, beauty, power, and everything that one can possess, and there is someone who lacks it; I also deny the absolute value of life and of the world. I feel that I am at the level of the man who has nothing, I feel that I have something in common with the worm squashed on the road; by denying with all my soul everything to do with luck, which links homage to absoluteness with happy outcomes, I take my revenge on this world of results, a world seeking to establish itself on its designs and its rights. And when someone tells me that there is a lower point still, I seek it out; if it is possible to reduce everything called fortune to nothing, I do it, and if there is a form of life which is poorer, more modest than an organism, such as a molecule of earth, and if someone tells me that even an atom is complex, I go wherever there is the least. That is the most personal contribution that I make, the unconditional homage to whoever has absolutely no power, that is the 'more' that I offer.

Reality

By means of this 'you' which I am constantly heckling, I add an infinite social and religious dimension. In this way a reality appears which is eternally bound up with my soul. I no longer limit myself to feeling that, in acting, I am accomplishing a duty imposed on me at this time and in this place by history, the spirit, creative freedom, or the universal: one often hears people say 'this is my task', 'my duty' or 'my mission'; we find that in the Gospels ('when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say: we are unprofitable servants, we have done that which was our duty to do'); we find it in the modern idea according to which the spirit is embodied historically in the individuality of actions. Religious 'persuasion' gives me a reality which corresponds to my deepest demands, which I see developing dynamically in history and until it dominates it infinitely: it is reality which also includes *he who hath not* and *he who is not*. Thus is overtaken the one who, intellectually and in isolation, would still seem to see spiritual values as extremely elevated and desperately solitary products of the spirit (a new stoicism, in the European American manner). Solidarity with the man who has nothing, who cannot work, who is ill or old or dead, is no longer a pious and melancholy wish; it is a concrete and dynamic reality, the foundation of infinite work in which everybody, without exception, can see and possess something which is relevant to them, which includes them and comforts them.

If I take as my point of departure the schematic conception of an individual who produces, in his own name, and enjoys fully the fruits of his labour, I can see in addition how many facts there are (tradition, family, religious state institutions, etc.) which penetrate and fragment this absolute individualism; facts which are summarized in that 'history' through which the individual recognises, especially these days, a basis, a reason, a support, and a solution for his work as an individual. Between the 'individual' who says: I have acquired wealth and I am benefiting from it immeasurably; I am the one who created this work of art and it will carry my name for all eternity; and the person who says: what I have done is nothing more than the execution of a duty which a universal value has imposed on my conscience, we discover a difference which allows us to understand how the second conception creates for itself a vastly larger space for our action, and is linked to a reality which rises up '*a guisa d'orizzonte che rischiarì*'.⁴

Production is not for the individual, but for society (which also includes those who are not rich). It would seem legitimate that family, nation, and humanity itself should expand participation in production and in the enjoyment of benefits. Giving everyone their 'due' becomes an increasingly complex (and permanent) problem as soon as benefits are regarded as a function of society, not because benefit passes from someone who has it to someone who does not as a result of substituting possession or power; but because (in a way which at first is internal and then constituted only by institutions and laws) those who produce feel that they are working publicly with everyone, in a potential and most effective union. And what someone makes does not just belong to the person who makes it, but to all men, to infinity. In what I do, or think I do, as an individual, I can see present all those beings who are or have ever been.

The point of view of 'having' is linked to the existence of beings and to goods in the world. But the condition of the man who possesses nothing (because he has not produced, acquired, inherited, etc.) contrasts with the individualist conception (I do possess, because I have produced, acquired, inherited, etc.) and leads to linking these goods to human society,

more than to the individual. If the goods which I have are mine because I use them for a goal which has a spiritual value, nevertheless I continually have a problem knowing how to distribute them and make others profit from them, knowing that, essentially, my goods belong to everyone; because everyone, visibly or not, has contributed to their production, and everyone deserves them for their benefit. Consequently, I say: I possess, and I possess jointly with all living beings. And by the same token I say: I am, together with all beings here (meaning by 'here' the fact of having appeared, even for a moment, which is infinite, in history). Those who seem not to work any longer are also intrinsically linked to my work, according to values. Just as possession of economic goods links me to all beings in existence, so action according to values links me with all beings who exist or have ever existed, even if they are dead, because these beings, merely by being born, have carried deep in their heart a value, and a value does not die: I live with these beings. Because of ethical and social 'persuasion', I want all beings in existence to enjoy economic goods in existence; because of religious conviction, I feel that all are infinitely present in the continued creation of spiritual values, even those who no longer seem to be.

Thus I find myself faced with an eternity which does not exist in a vision of a point which could satisfy me, in the resolution of one or more mysteries, but in the infinite presence of '*a world of history which unfolds according to values*'. Participation by their presence in Beauty, music, artistic visions which continually spring up, thought which continually organizes itself as problems, Goodness and Love, Justice which constructs better societies, and Freedom in its struggle with sin, is undertaken not just by those who appear to perform a certain act, or enjoy it, but by all beings. Graeco-European civilization's consciousness of itself begins to include the intrinsic multiplicity of presence of all beings. Values are not the invention of an absolute Unity which is reflected in itself, but of all beings who are born. Thus the world of the individual is enlarged to infinity; it rises, but does not disappear. Beatitude conferred by values is for everyone and it is infinite.

Thus my demands are satisfied and I feel that:

in this world of continually developing values, I am not the only one present, but all are present;

the presence of those who suffer, the defeated, the dead (in short, those who do not act), is not the content, but the creative form of values themselves;

Dante, Beethoven, and Michelangelo have contributed to the beauty of poetry, music, and architecture, as have thousands and thousands of suffering people, thousands and thousands of those who are now dead, and all those now alive in the world;

if I act in good faith in accordance with values, I move closer to everybody, including those who are dead.

Thus it is true, for example, that the sons of Count Ugolino, incarcerated despite their innocence in that horrible prison, are present in the work of justice! Thus it is true that the poet who was grieved to die because he had an idea for a new poem also takes part in artistic beauty which is continually flourishing. And the dead man to whom I have not shown the charity I should have done also has a part in both my repentance and my enthusiasm for charity today! I see, intimately linked with the creative freedom of history, the fulfilment of the demand that this infinite triumph of presence, participation, and the contribution of everyone should appear in it: without anyone being left out. The music I listen to is, deep within me, a heavenly song of all the living and all the dead.

Is nonviolence effective?⁵

The favourable reception reserved for some time for the term 'nonviolence' (which is now beginning to be written correctly, as one word, as it should be), probably signifies an acceptance of negation, that is to say an acceptance of the rejection of violence and of the influence it exerts, more than it signifies the realization of the positive and constructive possibilities that this notion implies. Sometimes the spirit in history becomes rigorous enough to make a negation appear obvious, and to exclaim 'enough!', after a series of previous excesses. All in all, it seems to me that, today, we are becoming aware of that role of history, of that production, and when I say that a supporter of nonviolence has to condemn the murder of thousands and millions of children of a people designated 'the enemy' for the same reasons as the murder of children of his own people, then your conscience, at that precise moment, feels and reaches consensus, it begins to do all it can so that things can change, and so that this principle can prevail and become a universal tendency. History itself, consequently, seems to make room for this tendency, and today more than ever, anyone who wants to make a practical contribution must take this into account.

To those who refuse to defer to this, and who would object that these would be hollow occupations; to those who have been educated in what they call 'realism' or in a sound sense of history (and it is indisputable that different qualities exist, heroic, perceptive, and revolutionary on the one hand, crude and fascist on the other; we knew about the latter when we were fighting fascism, allowing ourselves to be treated as 'pale melancholics'); to the 'historicists'⁶ who say that there are different types of violence, and that there is also the legitimate violence of the Algerian partisans, to all these people we, the supporters of nonviolence, know what we have to say in reply. We do not claim to remake past history, and we are perfectly capable of making a distinction between the uses made of violence, stemming either from the goals which it would like to serve or from the obstacles which it is destined to put an end to. But we also say to the 'historicists' that they must recognize that it is not true, historically, that the non-violent have always lost and the violent have always won, if it is true that the partisans in Judaea who rebelled against the Romans were conquered and crucified, and that the only one of those crucified who was able to avenge himself so spectacularly on Caesar was one of the non-violent. What is more, even Spartacus and his followers did not win; but Gandhi won without touching one hair on the heads of the English soldiers or their families in India, and when William Penn, with his Quaker friends, met the Red Indians unarmed, the chiefs threw down their own weapons, and they concluded a peace treaty, unlike all the others in North America. Victories without violence do exist.

There are also different types of eras, and each one has its '*partus masculus*';⁷ the true realist is the one who can understand that. Although a much greater moral sensitivity leading to a refusal to commit certain acts is gaining ground today, there still exists one obvious fact, that is, a line of reasoning that shows that the way of violence, once chosen, will be followed as far as is necessary and, if need be, to its inevitable conclusion. On the other hand, there are many people who have pointed out that this inevitable conclusion was mad destruction, and it was therefore necessary to construct a new morality, according to Anders. For the reasons I have just stated, the result obtained by the non-violent method through its various individual and collective techniques is such that we can now actually say that it is expected and appreciated.

Besides, when someone asks us how effective nonviolence is, we immediately ask them to reflect that, if the non-violent action of an isolated individual is taken as evidence – and non-violent action is valuable, for ripples from the innermost unity of a person can radiate out over a vast distance – it is also a fact that nonviolence is of benefit to the person who practises it as well as being of benefit to the person at whom it is directed. In order to understand its effectiveness, one has to consider that a person who acts in a non-violent way has most probably begun by reaching out to others, that he has links with others, that he has fostered and consolidated a great deal of solidarity, and that in such cases effectiveness can attain a high degree of visibility.

But I must immediately counteract a misunderstanding: for us, being a ‘pacifist’ does not mean accepting reality as it is, or society as it is, for the sake of a quiet life and in the name of misunderstood fraternity or resignation. For us, the wish for peace signifies a conscious choice of a way of fighting, of opposition and of challenging which is a non-violent way. I can cheerfully say that I am much more committed to fighting than many others, and consequently much more revolutionary than them, because I do not just oppose capitalism and imperialism, I have also fought against fascism to the best of my ability, and I have worked, and am still working to subvert authoritarian state control, the power ethic, and militaristic boastfulness. And I would go even further, because I do not accept that reality in which the big fish eats the little fish, in which the sick and the dead have no power, and I stand up to that reality with the techniques that I can use, up to and including the religious life of everlasting and ever-increasing ‘compresence’ with all beings, without excluding any, beyond the events of their lives, including that of their death.

The problem today is more extensive than it seems. I would like to point out the shortcomings of some ideas which are currently widespread. First and foremost, the idea that considers that power is the government of the state and, for that very reason, denies all value to a whole range of other forms of power in society, which are creative forces. That is why such ideas appear rather retrograde with respect to civilization; they encourage efforts to save institutionalized power, at whatever cost, and often with cruelty or in a fraudulent manner, whilst civilizations when they first arise truly give a new value to various forms of power and creativity *from below*, as we freely admit.

There are also shortcomings in the idea which states that a struggle for peace would certainly be necessary in the West, the home of capitalism, but that it would be superfluous in Soviet governments, as if freedom of information and of criticism, the existence of an opposition, a variety of opinions, and debate on all levels could be considered superfluous. We regard such things as necessary everywhere, including the peace marches for fraternity between peoples, which come from below; and in the development of our work for peace, we propose to make and increase contacts with all those who aspire to peace, in the West as in the East, by encouraging similar, complementary, and simultaneous demonstrations, and, where that is deemed to be impossible, by outright denunciation.

And we can also see shortcomings in the rationalist idea, which – though among the most respectable by comparison with those who aim to export force – is seeking to establish a legal relationship between states and peoples. A legal relationship should always be examined closely in order to ascertain the character of the forces which support it and defend it, for legal reality always necessitates development and integration, even at a high level, and it always follows from positions which are not legal.

To these shortcomings I would add another which can be seen when one observes the limits that, more and more, demonstrate the various forms of life, be they political, economic, or cultural. In other words, one must realize that a wider horizon exists, a totality which individual forms cannot produce; in short, that there exists scope for an inclusive principle to set to work.

Aldo Capitini

(translated from the Italian by Denis Trierweiler)

Notes

1. In Aldo Capitini (1994), *Scritti filosofici e religiosi* (Perugia: Protagon). The extracts reproduced here can be found on pages 73–5; 81–3; 91–3; 93–6; 97–8; 105–09.
2. Dante, *Purgatorio*, Canto 16, 1.88–9 (in the original, '*l'anima semplicetta che sa nulla*': 'the simple soul, which knows nothing') (N.d.l.R.).
3. Giacomo Leopardi, *Alla sua donna*, '*simile a quella che nel cielo india*' (N.d.l.R.).
4. Dante, *Paradiso*, Canto XV, 1.69, 'in the guise of the brightening horizon (in the original, '*per guisa d'orizzonte che rischiarì*') (N.d.l.R.).
5. In Aldo Capitini (1962), *La nonviolenza* (Milan: Edizioni di Comunità) pp. 15–17.
6. In the original, *storicisti*, derived from *storicismo*, 'historicism' (N.d.l.R.).
7. An allusion to Francis Bacon, *Temporis Partus Masculus*, 1602 (N.d.l.R.).