

MODERN PHENOMENOLOGY AND EXISTENTIAL EXPERIENCE*

Existentialism has almost become the philosophy of the day in non-catholic circles; and several catholic writers endeavour to give it an orthodox interpretation. It is an exaggerated reaction against the excessively abstract philosophy of Hegel. S. Kierkegaard (1813-1855), a Dane, who was its founder gave it a religious but lutheran tone. At first he did not have any noteworthy follower, and it seemed as if the seed he had sown were to bear no fruit. Some fifty years after his death, however, and exactly after the first World War, Existentialism was revived by M. Heidegger. His principal work *Sein und Zeit* appeared in 1927 and provoked a great storm. With few exceptions the author was accused by catholics and protestants alike of nihilism and, consequently, atheism. And both charges seemed well-founded. The first, namely that of nihilism, is based on the thesis *Was ist Metaphysic?*, where nothingness is placed side by side with, nay regarded as the basis of being, and on the general tendency of the whole work to consider death almost as the ultimate end of existence: Dasein is Sein zu Ende, ultimately Sein zum Tode. Atheism is the inevitable consequence of nihilism. And in fact J.P. Sartre¹ soon proposed to the world, as the last conclusion of the ontology of *Sein und Zeit*, his atheistic existentialism.

In *Brief über Humanismus* (1947) Heidegger strongly rejected both charges. He insisted that his interpretation of being was new, but positive; and he dissociated himself from the atheistic existentialism of Sartre. Yet, one must admit that his views on God totally differ from those of all Western theistic philosophies².

Since the publication of *Sein und Zeit* different writers have proposed different forms of existentialism. One must mention at least Karl Jaspers in Germany; J.P. Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Albert Camus and Simon Beauvoir in France; Nicola Abbagnano and Enzo Paci in Italy; Dostoyeski, W. Solovief and L. Chestof in Russia. Swiss existentialists are Heideggerians.

* The purpose of this article is to give a short exposition and refutation of Existentialism for the benefit of those readers that may not have the leisure to read long works on this important subject.

¹ Cfr especially his *L'Etre et le Néant*, 1943.

² Cfr C. Fabro, 'Il Problema di Dio nel pensiero di Heidegger' in *Analecta Gregoriana*, vol. lxvii, 17 ff.

Existentialism cannot easily be reduced to a system, for it takes different, obscure and still changing forms. Nevertheless, under all variety one notes the same basic ideas. The two main sources of this new philosophy are the transcendental phenomenology of Husserl and the so-called existential experience.

Transcendental phenomenology endeavours to clarify the *cogito* that marked the beginning of modern philosophy. It remarks that all perception of something is *my* perception of something, the ego being thus the invariable component element of all consciousness of anything. Yet the ego thus perceived does not reveal its being: it can become, however, the object of reflex consciousness and be examined in its being; but thus it will be one of all the beings we observe empirically. Likewise, the ego of cogito is the necessarily component element of all consciousness of something, but not as an empirical being. Whereas, therefore, the cogito of Descartes means the perception of the soul and of its existence as an empirical fact, phenomenologists merely note the invariable presence of the Ego in every thought of something. The cogito so understood introduces us into the order of the *cogitata*, that has its peculiar characteristics. Phenomenology stresses the relations of the *cogitata* to the ego, and limits itself to the pure transcendental analysis of the meaning of each *cogitatum* in our consciousness, without investigating the objective relation of the essence thought to the extra-mental object. Husserl alludes to the problem of the relation of the Ego to my soul and to the world of which I am conscious, but without expressing his mind thereon. Existentialists regard this necessary ego as a necessity of fact, as a contingent necessity, which can only serve to illumine us on contingency, on being³.

It is asked whether Husserl's phenomenology be after all a new form of transcendental idealism. It is at least certain that existentialists such as Heidegger, rejecting the traditional notion of truth, refuse to admit that theoretical thought perceives any reality distinct from itself⁴. Existentialism may be regarded as a form of nominalism and anti-intellectualism. All reality, it holds, is concrete and singular. Essences or natures, as absolute and universal, do not exist, and equally fictitious are the properties derived from such essences. Hence our intellectual ideas as abstract and universal, first principles as consisting of universal ideas, and abstract reasoning as formed of universal ideas and judgements, have no objective value. Reality is perceived otherwise.

³ Cfr K. Mytrowytcz, 'La Philosophie de l'existence etc.' in *Revue Philosophique de Louvain*, 1957, 470.

⁴ Cfr A. De Vos, 'La théorie Heideggerienne de la vérité' in *Analecta Greg.* vol. lxvii, 35 ff.

Existentialists mean to construct true philosophy. Up to now philosophy has based itself on fictitious universal concepts, essences and possibilities; and it has vainly investigated abstract being. Existentialism must investigate the nature of being as such, but of concrete and real being and, exactly, of man as the concrete and real being most obvious to us⁵. Through such an enquiry it will come to know the nature of real being as being, which is the aim of all true philosophy. And this brings us to the second source, existential experience.

The problem of being is not a purely theoretical one: it is forced upon us by experiences that deeply touch us, and that question our whole selves no less than the world and all that is. That is the existential experience, which, according to Heidegger, means anguish (Angst) in front of Nothing: Why is there anything and not Nothing?⁶ This Nothing reveals itself in anguish. Anguish, other than fear, is felt in front of Nothing; but we and all beings are in question. In front of this Nothing we feel annihilated and menaced with depersonalisation. What shall we become? What will being become? What is this menacing Nothing? Such anguishing questions are at the bottom of the ontological inquiry of Heidegger, who blames traditional metaphysics for having neglected the problem of 'Nothing'. In K. Jaspers existential experience involves the experience of the limits of the objective reality of the world and of our being. The basic experience of G. Marcel is the distinction between the mystery of being, which reveals itself as the Absolute Thou, and the problems of things. But what is the real value of feelings such as anguish, expectation of death, experience of limits etc. in ontology? It is generally answered that such feelings mean something, not as feelings, but as revealers of the structures of being and of the structures of our question on being.

Is a solution of the tragedy of life possible? Some, losing all hope of reaching any solution, end with Sartre in materialism and epicureanism. Others hold that this feeling of anguish arouses hope in and love for something that is the remedy to such anguish and the explanation of our contingency. Thus we come into contact with the transcendent that, according to K. Jaspers, is the unknown and unknowable of which we only know that it is transcendental.

Even in catholic existentialists one notes different shades. We may mention at least L. Lavelle, G. Marcel⁷ and R. Le Senne in France; A. Curtini, C. Guzzo, La Via, Pareyson, Sciacca and Stefanini in Italy; and

⁵ Called by existentialists *Dasein*.

⁶ K. Jaspers asks the same question in similar words.

⁷ A sincere convert to catholicism from idealism.

P. Wust in Germany. These, foremost among them Marcel, have restored to existentialism the religious tone it had lost through Heidegger: theirs, however, is a catholic interpretation. The Transcendent is the Christian God. Since we are dependent on God, Who is present in us through conservation and concurrence, a phenomenological observation of ourselves must bring us into contact with Him. Marcel speaks of an unconscious intuition of God, of which in the trials of life we become aware by intuitive reflection on ourselves helped by solitude and trust. And death is not a return to nothingness, but the dawn of eternal bliss upon pure souls.

Undoubtedly existentialism in its various forms is open to many objections. It is praiseworthy for stressing the reality of the individual against idealism, which dissolves individual personality and regards the individual ego either as merely phenomenal (Kant) or a phase and modification of the Absolute Ego or Spirit or Thought (Absolute Idealism). But the Schoolmen long before, following on the steps of St Augustine, had underlined the experimental perception of the soul. And against this new philosophy the following remarks have been passed.

1. It is based on philosophical prejudices. Universal ideas are not fictitious: the nature each expresses exists in extra-mental reality though in a different way, being abstract and universal in the mind, but concrete and singular in reality, e.g. the group of notes expressed by man really pertains to Peter. It is, therefore, equally false to say universal judgements and first principles as well as reasoning proper have no objective value. Were they not valid, universal scepticism would become inevitable. In fact, existentialists insist on the knowledge of concrete and individual reality; but it is only by universal ideas and judgements that we perceive the individual: how can I say that I am, I think and will etc., if I do not know what being, thought and will are? And it is indeed funny that existentialistic literature consists of universal ideas, judgements and reasonings, nor is it true that existence is the only reality of man, and that it must effect essence, or that there is nothing permanent in man.

2. Atheistic existentialism regards human life as vain and meaningless, because it ignores God: it denies to man any knowledge of God, because of its unwarranted mistrust of reason. Besides, a philosophy that chooses not to be rational cannot logically exclude God's existence as irrational.

4. Theistic existentialism admits an immediate knowledge of God: Does it mean thereby an immediate intuition of the Divine Nature? If so it only differs from Ontologism in that it regards this intuition as

suprarational or arational. But no finite creature can perceive the infinite God immediately. Or does it mean that by faith or trust we admit God, owing to the sentiments aroused in us by the contemplation of our misery? Well, if we do not see any connexion between such sentiments and the existence of God, we shall be asserting God's existence quite gratuitously and *quod gratis asseritur, gratis negatur*. If on the contrary existentialists think that we do see such a connexion, ours will be a real deduction: I feel these sentiments; such sentiments cannot be felt, if there is no God; therefore God exists. Existentialists, mistrust reasoning and cannot logically admit any argument. Besides, the minor premiss is highly questionable: such sentiments may be due to prejudice, to one's character, to the environment etc. It is quite true that from the data of our conscience, such as the sense of our contingency and the perception of moral obligation, etc., we can easily come to know God, but mediately, arguing, at least implicitly, from effect to cause.

4. Existentialism has not freed itself, as it pretended to do, of all Kantian influence. It is based on agnosticism and voluntarism. But this is the very essence of Kantism: in *The Critique of Pure Reason* Kant holds that the intellect cannot know things as they are in themselves; and in *The Critique of Practical Reason* he adds that, though speculative reason cannot know God, the immortality of the soul and moral obligation, we admit voluntarily these practical truths as postulates of practical reason.

5. The phenomenological description of our contingency and misery is new only in form; while the underlying truth has been stressed well enough by Christian ascetical writers.

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