

WHAT IS EXISTENTIALISM? A REVISION OF CONTEMPORARY DEFINITIONS

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ABSTRACT. In the following paper we provide a personal definition of the existential philosophy and the existential subject. Before that we explore other historical definitions of existentialism. We were mainly interested in the relation between existentialism and nihilism, the focus of existential philosophy on the individual and the situation of the studied philosophical trend on the 1950's zeitgeist. The definition of existentialism as a form of trans-rationalism and its capacity to become a practical alternative to contemporary academic philosophy were also emphasized.

Keywords: *existentialism, nihilism, postmodernism, practical philosophy, literature, individualism, irrationalism, trans-rationalism, death, anxiety*

Introduction

We would like to take into consideration some of the most important definitions of existentialism (before providing a personal definition, which analyzes the relations between the studied philosophical trend, nihilism and postmodernism) in order to understand its position in the history of philosophy. The first phase of existentialism is represented by Søren Kierkegaard, who publishes his most influential works in the 1840's Denmark. Its second chapter is mainly German and refers to the activity of thinkers like Friedrich Nietzsche, Edmund Husserl, Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger, who conceived their works between 1880 and 1940. Its third phase and its most recognizable one is the French version of existentialism that became the dominant philosophical trend between 1930 and 1970. Albert Camus, Gabriel Marcel, Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and especially Jean-Paul Sartre are the most visible French existentialists.²

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² For more on this chronology, see for instance Denis Huisman, *Histoire de l'existentialisme*, Editions Nathan, Paris, 1997, pp. 7, 122.

To understand the fundamental meaning of the concept of *existence*, a concept both vague and palpable in its everyday connotation, we must refer to a classical quote from Samuel Coleridge, which directs our existential sensibility in a splendid way. The Romantic poet observed in an essay from *The Friend*:

Hast thou ever raised thy mind to the consideration of EXISTENCE, in and by itself, as the mere act of existing? Hast thou ever said to thyself, thoughtfully, IT IS! heedless in that moment whether it were a man before thee, or a flower, or a grain of sand? ... The very words, There is nothing! or, There was a time, when there was nothing! are self-contradictory ... Not TO BE ... is impossible: to BE, incomprehensible. If thou hast mastered this intuition of absolute existence, thou wilt have learnt likewise, that it was this, and no other, which in the earlier ages seized the nobler minds, the elect among men, with a sort of sacred horror.³

This sample of being-phenomenology, which precedes the ontological difference and the distinction between essence and being (discussed mainly by Heidegger and Sartre), represents a sort of originary existentialism (one could also call it *Urexistenzialismus*), which considers that intuition and the pre-understanding of existence are a source of both philosophical enthusiasm and religious fascination. Coleridge, whose work belongs to a zeitgeist that precedes the activity of the principal forerunner of existentialism (i.e. Kierkegaard), writes about the impossibility of non-existence and the incomprehensibility of existence, starting from the poetical revelation of the totality and actuality of the almost inaccessible being.

From Nihilism To Existentialism

This fundamental direction towards existence once revealed, we can try to define existentialism, in its whole. Hans Jonas (1952) asserted in his book *The Gnostic Religion* the similarity between existentialism and nihilism (maybe as a consequence of the 1950's zeitgeist, which did not provide a working definition of existentialism): "More than two generations ago, Nietzsche said that nihilism, 'this weirdest of all guests,' 'stands before the door.' Meanwhile the guest has entered and is no longer a guest, and, as far as philosophy is concerned, existentialism is trying to live with him. Living in such company is living in a crisis."⁴

This psychological portrayal of existentialism, considered a trend, which tries "to live with" nihilism, is captivating. In order to do co-exist with it, existentialism must "hijack" the purpose of nihilism, inventing a meaning where nihilism presents only meaninglessness. This more than 60 years old definition provided by Jonas makes us think of the effective task of existentialism that had to bring over meaninglessness and to create value and meaning in a specific moment in which those had to be

³ Samuel Coleridge, *The Friend*, Chauncey Goodrich, Burlington, 1831, pp. 450-451.

⁴ Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, Beacon Press, Boston, 2001, p. 322.

reconstructed. The aforementioned definition has a strong historical connotation: the world after Auschwitz and Hiroshima seemed to have reached the "climax" of nihilism. Existentialism becomes the soul doctor of a "nihilism-infected" world and has to find solutions where the chaotic dimension of the society proves explosive.

Gary Cox (2009) re-thinks this relation between existentialism and nihilism: "Existentialists are nihilists because they recognize that life is ultimately absurd and full of terrible, inescapable truths. They are anti-nihilists because they recognize that life does in fact have a meaning: the meaning each person chooses to give his or her own existence."⁵ Existentialism emphasizes the inherent creativity of the human subjects, who must find their "personal truths" and have to invent meaning, even though they are living in a world where absurdity is unavoidable. To observe the difference between the two philosophical trends, one must only refer to their conceptions regarding death:

a) For existentialism, *death is viewed from the perspective of life*. This conception intends to stimulate the individual to realize his destiny, to achieve his life. One must construct a meaning, despite finitude. To live without the quest of a personal truth is to refuse self-awareness; more exactly, it is to refuse to live at all.

b) For nihilism, *life is viewed from the perspective of death*, life is an useless struggle. As many meaning wells we "drilled", we would be discouraged by our undeniable finitude. Our effort amounts to nothing because our achievements do not accompany us beyond death's door. From the reductive perspective of nihilism, which presupposes the appeal to a brutal lucidity, our resourcefulness and creativity are, to put it plainly, *lies*. Our beings are crushed and leveled by a death that acknowledges no merit.

Existentialism could reply to nihilism that the human being could prosper on the brink of abyss, could *live with death*, even though finitude is unavoidable. With death pressed against his heart, the individual can find a desire to go beyond himself and to build something amazing from his life. Therefore, existentialism opposes an affective truth ("I love this finite and unique life") to a mental truth ("the fact that death ends us is the background of our lives: compared to nothingness, our being is mainly appearance"). The mental truth requires a heroic lucidity; however, it could encourage the evasion of responsibility towards the "low" (i.e. passive) zones of nihilism, where truth and paralysis are identical.

Walter Kaufmann (1960) noted that "the existentialists have tried to bring philosophy down to earth again like Socrates"⁶, and Wartenberg (2008) added that

⁵ Gary Cox, *How to Be an Existentialist or How to Get real, Get a Grip and Stop Making Excuses*, Continuum, London, New York, 2009, p. 15.

⁶ Walter Kaufmann, *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, Meridian Books, New York, 1960, p. 51.

"existentialism is arguably the only contemporary form of philosophy that remains true to the conception of philosophy first articulated over two and a half millennia ago in Ancient Greece. For the Greeks, philosophy was ... the expression of a way of life, a mode of conduct"⁷. One should study existentialism as a contemporary initiation to philosophy, because it emphasizes action over intention: it is the way of thought harmoniously combining with the way of being. The mind-body dualism (the Cartesian reminiscence) is abandoned in favor of the quest for a practical philosophy, which tends to alter existence and reform it according to personal commandments (existentialism is akin to stoicism in this practical aspect).

The fact that existentialism expressed itself so fluently in literature (from Camus to Beckett, from Kafka to Sartre) is one of its advantages. The literary existentialism could convince even a philosophically unspecialized audience, with a philosophical pre-understanding through direct access to everyday life. The distance between the academic philosophy and the great affective problems of the contemporary human being (anxiety, absurd, meaninglessness, authenticity, death) is enormous: existentialist philosophy proposes a different approach: more personal and more direct. Existentialism should be studied, as we have mentioned, as an introduction to contemporary philosophy (along postmodernism –we have a pre-understanding of postmodernism while being immersed in contemporary society–), having an increased efficiency as a recovery after the essentialist mind games of the academic philosophy, which has lost contact with unmediated existence.

Towards A Historical Definition of Existentialism

William Barrett (1962) reveals an important piece of the existentialist discourse: the central subject of the existential philosophers is "the unique experience of the single one, the individual"⁸. The focus on the individual is emphasized not only by Macquarrie⁹ (1972) but also by contemporary authors like Earnshaw¹⁰ (2006) and Flynn¹¹ (2006). We have thus a philosophy of the individual extracted from the serial mass, but not a new solipsism: the way the individual interacts with others or how

⁷ Thomas E. Wartenberg, *Existentialism*, Oneworld, Oxford, 2008, pp. 4-5.

⁸ William Barrett, *Irrational Man. A Study in Existential Philosophy*, Anchor Books, New York, 1962, p. 13.

⁹ "For the existentialist the subject is the existent in the whole range of his existing." (John Macquarrie, *Existentialism. An Introduction, Guide and Assessment*, Penguin Books, London, 1972, pp. 14-15).

¹⁰ "Existentialism is a philosophy that takes as its starting point the individual's existence." (Steven Earnshaw, *Existentialism. A Guide for the Perplexed*, Continuum, London New York, 2006, p. 1.)

¹¹ "It is commonly acknowledged that existentialism is a philosophy about the concrete individual. This is both its glory and its shame." (Thomas R. Flynn, *Existentialism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York, 2006, p. X.)

he is immersed in social life, his effort to build an authentic existence, interest us greatly. However, existentialism begins with Kierkegaard's reaction to the Hegelian "absolutist" and "totalitarian" system, which tries to obliterate individual attributions. Texts like Kierkegaard's *Øjeblikket*, in which the subject needs to fight against conformism in his effort to establish an authentic society or Nietzsche's *Beyond Good And Evil*, in which the modern European must extract himself from the huge leveling process of history and civilization to become an exceptional individual, are constitutive for the existential individual ethos. The individual needs to go beyond the leveling and the conformism of the social life to find his true measure.

One should note that this existentialist focus on individual was under severe scrutiny. For example, Guido de Ruggiero (1947), found the existentialist exploitation of the theme of the individual highly disharmonious:

The existentialist philosophy ... gives a pathological development to the individual and contingent element of existence by lifting it to a ruling position and making it the measure of all values. The suffering of the individual, his preoccupation, his anguish, his defeat, his jump into nothing or into life beyond, have become absolute criteria of judgment, without any consideration being given to what the individual actually accomplishes in his passing through life.¹²

Actually, this criticism operates from the Hegelian position of impersonal objectivity, recording the very *anti-essentialism* of existentialism and that is exactly the author blames "contingency". One could answer the Italian philosopher that *anxiety, suffering, nothing* are concepts that belong to the philosophical existential heritage, active not only in postmodern philosophy but also in existential psychotherapy. To quote only Appignanesi (2001): "Could it be that the residue popularity of Existentialism today continues from a legacy of words that still have a power to *scandalize*? Anguish, despair, anxiety, the absurd, authenticity, nothingness, and so on, are literary features that have almost have the status of genuine 'categories'."¹³

Barrett gives two definitions of existentialism that exploit its historical dimension:

a) "Existential philosophy ... is ... a product of bourgeois society in a state of dissolution."

b) " Existentialism is the philosophy of the atomic age."¹⁴

An historical situation of existentialism is provided by Herbert Marcuse (1948):

¹² Guido De Ruggiero, *Existentialism: Disintegration of Man's Soul*, Kessinger Publishing, NewYork, 2004, p. 13.

¹³ Richard Appignanesi, Oscar Zarate, *Introducing Existentialism*, Totem Books, New York, 2001, p. 14.

¹⁴ William Barrett, *op.cit.*, pp. 34, 65.

'The following pages deal with the sentiment of absurdity which prevails in our world.' This opening sentence of Albert Camus' *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* conveys the climate in which Existentialism originates. Camus does not belong to the existentialist school, but the basic experience which permeates his thought is also at the root of Existentialism. The time is that of the totalitarian terror: the Nazi regime is at the height of its power; France is occupied by the German armies, the values and standards of western civilization are coordinated and superseded by the reality of the fascist system.¹⁵

Terry Eagleton's version (2009) of the zeitgeist argument appeals to the same "sentiment of absurdity", experienced by a whole generation in the critical moments of WW2:

It is surely not irrelevant to the arguments of Heidegger's *Being and Time* that the book was written in just such a period of historical tumult, appearing as it did in the wake of the First World War. Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, which also explores such momentous issues, was published in the midst of the Second World War ... Maybe all men and women ponder the meaning of life; but some, for good historical reasons, are driven to ponder it more urgently than others.¹⁶

These two historical definitions of existentialism are attacked by David E. Cooper (1999), who observed that "is quite wrong, first, to regard existentialism as the expression of post-war 'dishevelment', despair or malaise. To do so rather obviously confuses existentialism as a philosophy and existentialism as a vogue. All the best-known existentialist works, it should be noted, were written before the war began or before it ended"¹⁷. The British philosopher makes two valuable points: both *Being and Time* (1927) and *Being and Nothingness* (1943) were published before 1945; because of this fact existentialism (at least in its lab phase) should be regarded as an interwar philosophical trend. Moreover, its extended temporal validity¹⁸ suggests that existentialism is relatively prosperous even today, in psychology, in pop culture and in everyday life (the immanence of existentialism in our lives is revealed through the fact that choice is primordial in our lives, moreover, that we live in a culture of choice).

However, the post-war zeitgeist obviously belongs to existentialism, not so much as a "vogue", but as a dominant philosophy. This temporal identification cannot invalidate existentialism; on the contrary, we learn more about the

¹⁵ Herbert Marcuse, "Remarks on Jean-Paul Sartre's *L'Être et le Néant*", in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 8, No. 3, March 1948, International Phenomenological Society, p. 309.

¹⁶ Terry Eagleton, *The Meaning of Life: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York, 2008, p. 18

¹⁷ David E. Cooper, *Existentialism. A Reconstruction*, Blackwell Publishing, Malden, Oxford, 1999, p. 13.

¹⁸ "To describe existentialism as an expression of an age ... is to suggest that its claims could be only temporarily and locally valid." (David E. Cooper, *op.cit.*, *id.*)

existential theoretical principles studying the 1940's and the 1950's. Our starting point was Hans Jonas' ambiguous definition, which inferred the similitude between existentialism and nihilism. The determined zeitgeist makes us better understand the critics of existentialism, Guido de Ruggiero, Herbert Marcuse and even Pope Pius XII, who wrote in the *Humani Generis* encyclical (1950): "Such fictitious tenets of evolution which repudiate all that is absolute, firm and immutable, have paved the way for the new erroneous philosophy which, rivaling idealism, immanentism and pragmatism, has assumed the name of existentialism, since it concerns itself only with existence of individual things and neglects all consideration of their immutable essences."¹⁹

Another trait of the existential philosophy often revealed by its exegetes is its irrationalism. Mark Tanzer (2008) considers existential philosophy as a reaction to the pervasive rationalism of Continental philosophy: "In opposition to the Platonist claim that things in the world are in accordance with rationalist, unambiguous principles, that the world is rational ...; the existentialist claims that ... there are no unambiguous principles constituting that world – the world, for the existentialist, is irrational."²⁰ This irrational (or even antirational) dimension of existentialism is analyzed by Paul Tillich (1944) in his article on *Existential Philosophy*. The text of the existential theologian is one of the first interpretations of existentialism, taking into account the German cultural space and including (besides consecrated existentialists as Nietzsche and Kierkegaard) a few philosophers that usually belong to other philosophical trends, such as Schelling, Marx and Dilthey. Paul Tillich wrote:

What all philosophers of Existence oppose is the 'rational' system of thought and life developed by Western industrial society and its philosophical representatives. During the last hundred years the implications of this system have become increasingly clear: a logical or naturalistic mechanism which seemed to destroy individual freedom, personal decision and organic community; an analytic rationalism which saps the vital force of life and transforms everything, including man himself, into an object of calculation and control; a secularized humanism which cuts man and the world off from the creative Source and the ultimate mystery of existence.²¹

We must note that the existential philosopher refers mostly to the German brand of existentialism (or *Existenzphilosophie*), because the works of the French existentialists were relatively unknown in 1944.

¹⁹ Pius XII, *Humani Generis*,
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xii/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_12081950_humani-generis_en.html (consulted on 17.03.2014).

²⁰ Mark Tanzer, *On Existentialism*, Thomson Wadsworth, Belmont, 2008, pp. 2-7.

²¹ Paul Tillich, "Existential Philosophy", in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 5, No. 1, Jan. 1944, University of Pennsylvania Press, p. 66.

We can answer this accusation of the irrationalism of existential philosophy in at least three different ways:

a) It is true that existentialism is oriented, foremost, to affects, understood as "vehicles of understanding"²² and not as the residues of a clear and cold mind. Kierkegaard and Heidegger show that anxiety is a fundamental and ontological affect which reveals the world in its entirety. We find that the "intelligence of emotions" (the expression belongs to Robert Solomon) is one of the essential discoveries of existentialism, a discovery that does not veer towards irrationalism and that aims to understand the human life in its entirety.

b) Kierkegaard, Shestov, Camus but also Cioran, Ionesco and Kafka meet with the problem of the absurd, understood as a limit of the human rationality. Their apparent irrationalism is at the same time a struggle against meaninglessness and an effort to generate alternative meanings and reasons. We should describe their thought as a deeper and larger (also more subversive) trans-rationalism.

c) The forerunners of existentialism, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche go beyond the narrow Hegelian rationality (the so called identity between reality and reason), analyzing despair, anxiety, the possibility of the suspension of ethics, on one hand, the will to power, the death of God, the destruction of the morals, on the other. But their discourse, undermining the Western rationality is technically built through the methodology of the same rationality: synthesizing, their irrationalism (or what we better named trans-rationalism) creates a new thought territory, a new philosophical field, which widens and completes the heritage of Western rationalism. Moreover, this accusation is tempered in the writings of Cooper²³ and Solomon²⁴, who, discussing existential phenomenology, observe the coherence and even the systematization of the philosophical trend, which in this way becomes a harmonious part of the history of philosophy. To call existentialism "nihilistic", "rebellious" or "irrational" is to be ignorant of the elegance and discipline of thinkers like Heidegger or Merleau-Ponty .

Conclusion

Summarizing, the traits of existential philosophy are:

²² David E. Cooper, *op.cit.*, p. 17.

²³ "Existentialism ... is not a mood or a vocabulary, but a relatively systematic philosophy." (David E. Cooper, *op.cit.*, p. 9)

²⁴ "The dramatic ethical and literary masterpieces of the existentialists are first the products of a serious and technical development within traditional Western epistemology and Husserl's phenomenology." (Robert C. Solomon (Ed.), *Phenomenology and Existentialism*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, 2001, p. 38.)

- a) a recuperation and a transgression of nihilism (Hans Jonas, 1952);
- b) an understanding of philosophy that reminds us of the Socratic meaning (Walter Kaufmann, 1960, Thomas Wartenberg, 2008);
- c) a focus on the individual (William Barrett, 1962, Macquarrie, 1972, Earnshaw, 2006, Flynn, 2006);
- d) although belonging to postwar zeitgeist, it has an extended temporal validity (Cooper, 1999);
- e) it can be seen as ambiguous and irrational (Mark Tanzer, 2008), it is – we have argued – in fact a form of *trans*-rationalism.

Considering that there are at least five ways of accessing the problem of existentialism, we believe that the most important traits are the recuperation and transformation of nihilism, the focus on the individual and the fact that existential philosophy expresses *par excellence* the postwar zeitgeist. Our personal definition of existentialism follows: existentialism is the alternative to the reductive manner of nihilism and to the fragmentary method of postmodernism, endorsing the existent individual in its entirety, an individual immersed in a universe, which offers mostly meaninglessness and discontinuity.

The existentialist can be characterized through his capacity of facing anxiety, pursuing authenticity and recuperation of death. The attitude of the existentialist towards choice, decision and responsibility is exemplary. The existentialist knows the founding value of the choice, which has an open horizon and must be kept in pure potentiality. The decision that follows after choice, although narrowing the horizon of the existential subject, must be respected and brought in the field of continuity. Immersed in a culture of irresponsibility (in which the society, fate, God, the genes are always to blame), the existentialist will comprehend that the assignment of guilt, with all its seductive appearance, is ineffective, covering up the truth.

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