

NOTES ON EXISTENTIALISM

Being notes on lectures by Bernard J.F. Lonergan, S.J., given to a group of scholastic philosophers at Boston College, Summer 1957. Reprinted by the Thomas More Institute.

General Orientation, *On Being One's Self, Philosophic Significance of Themes*

1. By "existentialism" we shall understand the types of method and doctrine exemplified by K. Jaspers, M. Heidegger, J.-P. Sartre, Gabriel Marcel.

The name is admitted by Jaspers and Sartre; it was admitted for a while by Marcel who after "Humani generis" and, perhaps, to disassociate himself from Sartre, rejected it; Heidegger says he is concerned with Ek-sistenz.

Jaspers is Kantian and Lutheran; Heidegger an apostate and agnostic; Sartre an atheist; Marcel a convert to Catholicism.

2. They are concerned with what it is to be a man, not in the sense of having a birth certificate, but in the sense employed by President Eisenhower last fall when, asked whether it was not risky to send the fleet into the Mediterranean during the Egyptian crisis, answered "We have to be men".

"Being a man" in that sense results from a decision, is consequent to the use of one's freedom, makes one the sort of man one really is, involves risk (in the present instance, the risk of nuclear warfare and all that implies).

3. It is anti-positivist: "being a man" is not any set of outer data to be observed, any set of properties to be inferred from the outer data, any course of action that can be predicted from the properties; it springs from an inner and "free" determination that is not scientifically observable.

It is anti-idealist: the various transcendental egos are neither Greek nor barbarian, bond nor free, male nor female; they don't suffer and they don't die; we do.

Positivism and idealism have been major determinants in producing the contemporary world; in the measure that the contemporary world is found unsatisfactory or, frankly, disastrous, existentialism has a profound resonance.

"Sein und Zeit" quickly ran through 5 editions; Jaspers' "Geistige Situation der Zeit" was through 5 editions in about a year and has been translated into six languages including Japanese; Sartre was a cafe hero in Paris.

This contemporary resonance fits in with existentialist concern for time and for history.

Since "being a man" is not a fixed essence with which we are endowed from birth but the result of the use of our freedom, and further since "being a man" is not a property that necessarily remains with us but is maintained by us precariously in the continuous use of freedom, "time" is an intrinsic and necessary component in "being a man". Hence, Heidegger's "Sein und Zeit", Marcel's "Homo Viator". However, concern with history on the grand scale appears only in Jaspers, e.g., "Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte."

4. It is unconcerned with propositional truth and with man's per se capacities for truth or anything else.

This unconcern arises in Heidegger, Sartre, from phenomenological concentration on the sources, grounds, whence spring concepts and judgments.

It arises in Jaspers from Kant who is believed to have shown that any objective statement deals only with appearance.

It arises in Marcel from his concern with being a good man as opposed to mere existence as a man, and the common attitude (buttressed by dissatisfaction with idealism) that technically correct propositions have little or nothing to do with what you really are.

In all it arises from a turning away from the universal, necessary, abstract, per se, to the unique individual, the contingent, the concrete, the de facto.

Jaspers repeatedly insists that freedom is not definable; Sartre establishes the fact of freedom by asking whether you have been in the torture chamber with the Nazis and made the experiment of freedom by not giving your comrades away; none of them would dream of discussing "man" as what is common to mewling infants, people sound asleep, and the mature man facing a crisis in his life.

Gabriel Marcel: "Plus il s'agit de ce que je suis et non de ce que j'ai, plus questions et reponses perdent toute signification. Quand on me demande, ou quand je me demande, en quoi je crois, je ne puis me contenter d'énumérer un certain nombre de propositions auxquelles je souscris; ces formules, de toute évidence, traduisent une réalité plus profonde, plus intime: le fait d'être en circuit ouvert par rapport à la Réalité transcendante reconnue comme un Tu." Quoted by R. Troisfontaines, "De l'existence à l'être, II, 352.

5. This unconcern with propositional truth and this distaste for the per se is de facto connected with an incapacity to provide foundations for either propositional truth or the per se.

It is my firm conviction that, while there is much in existentialism on which we should practise the patristic maxim of despoiling the Egyptians, still we cannot simply take existentialism (even Marcel's) and incorporate it within scholasticism.

6. Existentialism is concerned with the human subject qua conscious, emotionally involved, the ground of his own possibilities, the free realization of those possibilities, the radical orientation within which they emerge into consciousness and are selected, his relationship with civilization, other persons, history, God.

7. G. Marcel is not a systematic thinker; in his preface to R. Troisfontaines' "De l'existence à l'être", he congratulates the author on having done for him what he could not do for himself.

G. Marcel is a penetrating thinker and an extremely effective writer: he can put a concrete idea, orientation, criticism of life, across with extraordinary brevity and skill.

He reviews his intellectual history in "Regard en arrière", a paper added to the collection "Existentialisme chrétien: Gabriel Marcel", introd. by E. Gilson, contributors include Delhomme, Troisfontaines, et al. See Bochenski.

His "Journal métaphysique, I," was published in 1927, the date of "Sein und Zeit". His background is idealism (including Bradley) and Bergson; Kierkegaard is acknowledged to have influenced him indirectly.

8. K. Jaspers began with abnormal psychology of which he became professor and wrote various technical articles; he has a profound respect for science and is a mordant critic of scientists; forty years ago he was ridiculing the mythology of the brain and the mythology of the unconscious in the psychologies of his time.

He is a Kantian with the "Critique of Practical Reason" brought to life by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche.

He is the most broadly cultivated of the existentialists and with the widest range of interests; he writes very intelligibly, explains exactly what he means, strikes one as very balanced and sane.

In his "Philosophie" (1932) he explains that Existenz and Transzendenz correspond roughly to what are named by mythical consciousness the soul and God.

Since then he has developed the notion of das Umgreifende (which corresponds roughly to the notion of being in Insight) and has come to place a great deal more emphasis and reliance on reason (more perhaps to disassociate himself from Sartre and similar tendencies than from assignable grounds) and to speak openly of God (as a necessary philosophic postulate).

9. M. Heidegger is perhaps the most original and profound of the lot; his immediate source is Husserl; from Heidegger by way of a strong dose of French clarity and logic comes Sartre, who figures as the reductio ad absurdum of the movement.

ON BEING ONESELF

1. Subject is subject of; a relative term; meaning varies with correlative.

Grammatical: function in sentence.

Logical: function in proposition.

Metaphysical: recipient: matter, form; potency, act, etc.

Psychological: subject of stream of consciousness.

2. Consciousness streams in many patterns: dream, biological, aesthetic, intellectual, dramatic, practical, mystical.

Contrast: subject of stream as orientated on knowing, and subject of stream as orientated on choosing.

Of old: speculative and practical reason; now, concrete flow orientated on knowing and oriented on choosing.

3. Intellectual pattern is intellectual by its detachment, by non-intervention of alien "subjective" concerns, by concentration of attention, effort, on observing, understanding, judging.

Subject is involved, but as involved he is subordinated to dictates of method, to immanent concretion within himself of principles of logic, of scientific aspiration, of absolute criteria: commitment is to submission to norms.

Subject is headed towards object, universe; he himself enters into picture only within objective field, as a particular case in a broader totality; the data of his consciousness may be a source of information, but they are relevant not qua his.

Subject has a responsibility: his judgment is his, and "personne ne se plaint de son jugement"; still it is a limited responsibility, for he can frame his conclusions as positive or negative, certain or probable, etc.; in brief he is bound to say what he knows and no more than he knows, re object and re mode, but he is not committed to reaching definite results.

4. The practical pattern of experience demands the intervention of the subject.

He may choose A or B, A or Not A; or he may consent to drift, permit himself to be other-directed, where however the consenting and permitting are equivalent to choosing, though an inauthentic equivalent.

The choice, decision, drift, are determined neither externally, biologically, psychically, nor intellectually.

Even when one knows everything about everything, an operabile cannot be demonstrated; it admits no more than rhetorical syllogisms. But in fact I do not know everything about everything; I do not know everything that ultimately is relevant to the choices I have to make; and none the less I already am alive, thinking, acting, under a perpetual necessity of drifting or choosing, choosing A or Not A, B or Not B,

Hence, choosing is within an atmosphere of incertitude, and so it involves an acceptance of risk.

Choosing not only settles ends and objects; it gives rise to dispositions and habits; it makes me what I am to be; it makes it possible to estimate what I probably would do; it gives me a second nature, an essence that is mine in virtue of my choosing; still it does not give me an immutable essence, achievement is always precarious, radical new beginning possible.

In choosing I become myself; what settles the issue is not external constraint nor inner determinism nor knowledge but ut quo my will and ut quod myself; in the last analysis the ultimate reason, for my choice being what it is, is myself, if left to mere balancing of motives impulses, then I consent to drift; I consent to being other-directed; I implicitly choose as myself the "On", "Man" --- inauthenticity.

if not left to mere balancing of motives impulses, then I intervene, I knowingly assume risk and responsibility.

in either case what ultimately is operative is purely individual, unique.

in the drifter what results is another instance of the average man in a given milieu.

in the decisive person what results is what he chooses to be.

in the drifter, individuality is blurred; his individuality is his consenting to be like everybody else.

in the decisive person there comes to light both his individuality and the total-otherness of other individuals; my choice is what it is because that's what I choose; yours is because that's what you choose; even when what is chosen is the same, still the sources are simply different.

Finally, there are limiting situations: the drifter can no longer just drift; and the decisive person is powerless to change things by deciding,

general: historical period, social milieu of birth, opportunities, male or female, old or young;

particular: death, suffering, struggle, guilt; confronted with limiting situations, the drifter may try to forget, but ultimately he cannot succeed; he is totally involved, all of him is involved, and he is totally unprepared.

on the other hand, the decisive person can be as decisive as he pleases, but the limiting situation is not thereby removed.

5. 'Oneself' is the irreducibly individual element whence spring the choices of the decisive person and the drifting, forgetting, of the indecisive.

What springs from that source is free; for it, one is responsible.

What results from that source is not only the sequence of activities but also the character of the man, the second nature, quasi-essence, by which precariously one is what one is.

Nor does choosing wait upon learning, the acquisition of as much knowledge as might be relevant; it involves risk and incertitude.

Finally, in choosing is involved everything that concerns me.

6. Being oneself is being the subject of fine acts. It is existential existence. In the limit, ex-sistence implies the transcendent, absolute:

Within a satisfactory synthesis, there is possible an alternation, a Withdrawal and Return, a mutual complementarity.

In the intellectual pattern of experience I am choosing because I choose to submit entirely to the exigences of knowing in order to know; and without that knowing there would be, not merely a residual incertitude and risk to choosing, but a total blindness that makes choice indistinguishable from mere force, instinct, passion.

In the practical pattern of experience, there is an ultimate moment of "being myself," of incertitude and risk, and none the less total commitment; but it is a known ultimate moment, and it is within a context of knowing and with respect to a largely known.

ON BEING ONESELF. Philosophic Significance of the Theme.

1. It provides a ready rationalization for those who do not wish to endure the restraints of knowing. Let's drop philosophy, speculative theology, science.

Love of neighbour, zeal for souls, dialogue, disponibilité, prayer.

2. Breaks through positivist science of man.

It denies that there is any ready-made essence or nature with predictable properties.

L'homme de définit par une exigence.

Eisenhower: "We have to be men." It implies that we might be less than men, that there is an exigence for us to be men, that the exigence is to be met by a decision.

3. Breaks through pragmatist science of man.

One learns from experience about things, about one's own potentialities.

But the issue is not one of knowing whether a priori or a posteriori; given all the knowledge possible, all the human experiments desirable, there still remains the whole issue of deciding which even then would involve incertitude and risk.

And meanwhile one already is living, and one has only one life. The decision to risk nuclear warfare is not justifiable pragmatically.

4. Breaks through the idealist view of man.

The idealist's absolute or transcendental ego is neither Greek nor barbarian, neither male nor female; it neither dies nor suffers nor struggles nor acknowledges guilt.

The idealist's world is world that is pure intelligibility, rational throughout; it is not a world of free choices springing from unique individuals that are totally concerned in the once-for-all of the momentous moment.

5. Sets problems for contemporary scholasticism

a. What meaning is possible for the fact that I become myself.

Ambiguity that comes to light in metaphysical theory of person, subsistence.

Rests on issue: is metaphysics knowledge of things through their causes or through the decem genera entis.

Is the thing just its substance or is the thing a whole that includes both substance and accidents.

b. Verum et falsum sunt in mente; bonum et malum sunt in rebus. But in the concrete, there are no abstractions, and so there is no abstract good.

But there remains for each one to work out concretely what the good really is.

There remains an order of the universe, but it is not an order deducible from abstract essences and schematic hierarchies; it is a concrete unfolding in concrete situations; and the concrete situations are proximately the product of individual decisions about the concrete good.

There remains the natural law (situations do not change moral precepts) but there arises the significance of kairos, of my situation, my opportunity, my duty; and while these can be illuminated by moralists, by spiritual directors, the ultimate issue is whether or not I am to take a risk and assume a total responsibility and rise to the occasion.

There is to the order of the universe the emergence of good from evil, the heightening of evil to a maximum that sets the alternative of conversion or destruction.

Where the evil is to be met not by being included as intelligibility within the order but as surd violating the order, as a demand not for justice but for self-sacrifice and charity.

The order of the universe is not a mechanistic plan flowing from essences; it may descend to that through sin; but it rises from it inasmuch as the order is a matrix, network, of personal relations.

Situation, surd, kairos, charity.

c. The need of an ancilla that will supply theology with the categories necessary to assimilate the doctrine of the Bible.

The possibility of such an ancilla: can existential questions be handled by the Catholic philosopher; do they not suppose knowledge of theology by their very nature.

d. Withdrawal and return: not simply the mutual dependence of willing to know and knowing to will.

There is the problem of conversion (reorientation, reorganization of mind and life).

Kierkegaard's spheres: aesthetic, ethical, religious A and B.

Upward change is not in virtue of knowledge on lower plane; it is not in virtue of will following knowledge on lower plane.

There has to be the apparent irruption of a latent power, the possibility of a radical discovery where the discovered has been present all along, the fact of an ob-nubilation that prevented prior discovery.

This sets the radical question in all philosophizing.

It is relevant for scholastics with their unnumerable disputed questions, and no method of solution not only not in sight but not even desired, sought, seriously believed in.

In various measures it is the concern of the thinkers named existentialists;

Proposal: to face our existential question and through it move towards some understanding of this question for others.