

Essays on Existentialism

Alfredo M. Bonanno

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Introduction

Existentialism is the philosophical current that affected my life in the latter half of the nineteen fifties. I had read all the books of Benedetto Croce at a very young age, a heavy baggage to carry around until my release on reading Abbagnano's History of Philosophy and beginning the study of the French, German and Russian poets and philosophers. All of this research, which has continued alongside the flourishing of other interests for almost thirty years, is divided into three parts here:

- a) *Essays on existentialism*. This comprises all the articles published in the late fifties following my experience in Turin with *Corriere di Sicilia* of which I was editor of "page three".
- b) The *philosophy of existence*. This includes essays dedicated to existentialist thinkers (Sartre, Camus, Marcel, Merleau-Ponty, Berdjaev, Husserl, Heidegger, Jaspers, Lavelle, Paci and the existentialist interpretation of Stirner and Thoreau).
- c) *The failure of existentialism*. *Nicholas Abbagnano*. A sort of closure of accounts with my old teacher, misunderstandings included.

I was unable to use my original notes for the *Essays on existentialism*, which should now be considered lost for ever. Of the authors included in them not one, with the exception of Kierkegaard, is, let's say, a canonical existentialist and this is my most obvious debt with regard to Abbagnano, which I openly acknowledge here. He was concerned with Plato's existentialism, I went looking elsewhere where the terrain was more congenial to me and where, of course, there was something more interesting to be found.

Following my disillusionment with Abbagnano's teaching I ran away from Turin, taking about a thousand single-spaced typewritten pages with me. I published most of the material in the above-mentioned newspaper in the period 1958-1959 after reducing the various essays to "page three" dimensions and leaving out most of the citations. Where possible the quotations have now been reconstructed with the most current references added, nearly always in the *Annotations*, thereby leaving the articles in their original form.

Still for these *Essays on existentialism*, I edited the *Notes* in the concentration camp of Amfissa and the prison of Korydallos, putting them at the end of each essay as they were more mature and defined considerations on many problems which, starting from existentialism and the authors that I studied more than half a century ago, are developing in the present condition that we are all living in and run the risk of slipping through our hands.

A selection of authors may have a guideline or it may not. The present one does, which it maintains over the course of the year that this particular effort of study lasted but does not do the title justice. It is not so much a philosophy of existence that I was looking for but the atrocity of life, that dark side which allows, thanks to contrast, a better understanding of what is happening in the light.

In these paths, the tension continually rises to the point of reaching maximum peaks in authors who directly experience the flames with which to live and destroy one's life, the flames of defeat.

No certainty about being, displaced in so much of the dominant philosophy of reason, that of appearing. In these authors being mixes and drowns itself in appearing from time to time, always differently, with almost irreversible irony. The contrast is never evident, because appearing is also being, albeit reduced to the semblance of a shadow. It is this veiled and at times almost invisible atrocity which slips into consciousness bringing it to an unbearable tension where it is ultimately forced to decide, either grow and self-concentrate in being or fade into appearance, find a squalid and tranquil secluded sunset by the fire. Being lives off excess, appearance off returning to order. Excess explodes in the improbable and unrepeatable, weakening coexists with itself in a funereal and static agreement.

Of course, however much one might have guessed all this, which was neither in my original essays nor in Abbagnano's lessons, something emerged in those lessons in fits and starts, immediately taken back to the positive solution, out of thin air for goodness sake, we are talking about university professors, not frequenters of bistros. That's why I went elsewhere to look for that explosion of being that I was afraid of losing in the French - of which I had direct knowledge - and German philosophical labyrinths. And first of all I found it in the life of some of the poets (Nietzsche included) and a few philosophers.

Explosion of being means ruin, conscious self-exile within oneself, cutting bridges, demolition of walls, no comfort or alleviation from outside, often reduced to places of unique squalor with no one able to mention a human relationship that does not expose man's cruelty and bestiality. Here appearing portrays itself in its fictional compactness, it cannot explode, it limits itself to showing in an uncertain, bored, continuous but not uniform way, like a flame extinguishing.

I went looking for being and its opposite with all the enthusiasm of my twenty years, without noting - how can you at that age? - that this research was sweeping me away with it, I was falling apart, it faced me mercilessly with the limitations of my previous studies, hard and tiring, and the misery of my life as a bank clerk.

These essays can therefore be read the other way round, as a research of the being me within myself, not in the extraordinary events of the texts that I was reading, about which Abbagnano's lessons gave me only marginal recuperative help. Only in these pages it is possible to read of the birth and development of my abandoning Turin. The evidence is there in "Existentialism and Marxism" and "Existentialism and Christianity", the latter lost because refused by "*Corriere di Sicilia*". The truly remarkable sequence of these spectacular reading experiences quickly procured a deterioration of relations with Abbagnano who in his positivist closure turned out to be increasingly incomprehensible to me. Vertigo, he called them, perhaps due to an imperfect knowledge of the texts, convulsions of sick minds, but I am not sure about this definition, perhaps my memory betrays me. However, let's leave this relationship to its fate, my philosophical studies in the scholarly sense of the term had to continue elsewhere.

Although, in my opinion, existentialism poses the problem of being, this philosophy cannot move an inch unless it takes on the dichotomy with appearing. And I wanted to be, i.e. live and act, not just dream or think. Faced with these authors I did not so much wonder what they were saying but whether I was thunderstruck, enchanted or simply indifferent to their words. This was my measure, and it is the one that we must hold on to in this book that is bringing these essays back to life if we want to understand what they were saying and whether they are still saying it today.

Almost all of these authors, apart from a few that I chased right inside their neat and recuperatory appearances, have a subtle and varied way of saying what they say and of hiding what

they don't want to say. Always unapproachable in a direct and calm way. One must be prepared for epochal clashes, falls and unforeseeable obstacles. Just one of them, let's say Kierkegaard or Baudelaire, could take a lifetime of incredible reflections. Instead, these essays were a carefree ride over the surface, it could not be otherwise, a terrifying and delightful adventure.

The unity of these essays was not clear to me, and I have reflected about this at length in the decades that followed their original compilation. The unity is less evident in the form of newspaper articles, I flatter myself that I have partially restored it here by re-elaborating the pieces that were missing or those omitted at the time of publication. I can summarize it in the colours black and silver, which Baudelaire spoke of, perhaps reducing the presence of pink. Something howled sinisterly in the rarefied mountain air where the father of Kierkegaard curses God. Far off and painful commerce, like Rimbaud's occupation, is echoed in Dostoevsky's renunciation of life. Gide's asphyxiations and Nietzsche's madness (still unclear to me at the time), Bergson's attempt to penetrate the time of Augustine, pieces of an unprecedented feat.

The undertaking is re-examining, not with the usual philosophers' techniques but with the power of philosophy, the terrible ways of the human animal, the gangrenous affairs of this always resurgent plague that no one can heal, the obscure reason why this scourge is fuelled by the many Ancelle notaries that tortured Baudelaire all his life. And this framework points out the political and capitalist nature with a singular style and capacity of penetration. The old academic that was fighting stale positivism in new, socialist and progressive ways, nauseated me, the re-reading of Crocean liberalism urged me to better reconsider Gentile, the hermetics like Mario Apollonio caused me hives. Compared to Kierkegaard they said nothing, repeating the same story for so long that it was better to stop reading them. I continued to accept Croce for his style, but in the end I put these authors out of sight. The deployment I proposed showed a different way of living one's life, even gambling it when necessary. In them there was, and is, a consonance with what my life had been and remains intact today in the horrendous place where I am writing these Notes.

The reading of thousands of pages quickly produced in me a kind of addiction to these authors, as though I had to do with a secret society which I was about to enter. Not everything I read pleased me, often I found excessive a search for the horrid like a taste in its own right, an isolated arrogance that at the time of my youthful fury/ furori sounded like marginalized and not as marginal, a narrative pomposity that in some repulsed me, but in the end I realized that behind these so-called defects there was a clear choice. In this sense, the reading of Nietzsche, even in the not excellent translation of Barbara Allason was an impressive discovery. The brilliant insights were formulated with a poetic liturgy - I am referring to Zarathustra - surprising for a philosopher. Then the undertaking of Pietro Chiodi, of rendering Heidegger in Italian, my feelings before a metallic logic, not exactly contrived, but able to open the words one by one, produced a kind of loss of the totality in me, a ferocious curtailment, only to discover that I was not losing anything, but rather was gaining something.

With these experiences, I came close to the human beast, literary evil, which is anyway the result of sublimation and not tautology, but is still an overwhelming experience. For the first time I had before me the extension of what I had foreseen but never known. One sole example, drugs. To someone like me, always sure of myself, as I continue to be my old age in a Greek prison beyond all repressive imagination, experiences reverberated to branch out into many reflective streams, into a thousand connections, imaginations, dreams and, why not, also terrors. I felt like an engraver of prohibited incisions, an explorer of unknown territories, a scholar of canons still to

be determined. After all, as still emerges today even in a benevolent reading, I was still estranged to this chasm opening up before me. Estranged and credulous.

My reading was therefore that of a still tender heart that wants to know everything of this new and fascinating universe, wants to introject and mirror it to better make it their own. But for the time being I just limited myself to registering and researching it. The real approach, making these tensions in life my own, would come later, still in an infantile manner, that's true, but not futile or detached. Here I am superimposing myself on the objects studied, scaling mountains, crossing deserts, going down underground, up guillotines, filtering everything through my personal dreamlike vision. In daily practice this holds a dangerous dichotomy for me: enter unheard of experiences or remain at immensurable distances?

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Completed in Amfissa concentration camp (Greece), in December 2010

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