

Existentialism, Marxism and Anarchism

Herbert Read

1949

Contents

Notes

17

The origins of the existentialist movement are usually traced back to Kierkegaard, whose main philosophical works appeared between 1838 and 1855. As these were written in Danish, they did not immediately get into general circulation. Various selections made by Barthold were published in Germany between 1873 and the end of the nineteenth century, but the first complete German translation of his works only appeared between 1909 and 1923, and the Anglo-American translation began as late as 1936. However, there is no excuse for making Kierkegaard the founder of existentialism. It is true that he gave the movement a specifically Christian twist, but all the main ideas were already present in the philosophy of Schelling, and one should remember that Kierkegaard, however much he may have criticized Schelling, was nevertheless at first profoundly influenced by this great German philosopher, and in 1841 made a special voyage to Berlin in order to sit at his feet. Incidentally, long before Kierkegaard our own Coleridge had been reading Schelling's early works, and we find in Coleridge's lesser-known writings a good deal of existentialist thought. As I have pointed out elsewhere,¹ all the main concepts of modern existentialism — *Angst*, the abyss, immediacy, the priority of existence to essence are to be found in Coleridge, and most of these concepts Coleridge no doubt got from Schelling.

It is necessary for my present purpose to give some general description of the existentialist attitude in philosophy, but I am not a professional philosopher and I do not intend to use the technical terminology in which quite obvious facts or ideas are often clothed. It would seem that the philosopher who calls himself an existentialist begins with an acute attack of self-consciousness, or *inwardness*, as he prefers to call it. He is suddenly aware of his separate lonely individuality, and he contrasts this, not only with the rest of the human species, but with the whole goings-on of the universe, as they have been revealed by scientific investigation. There he is, a finite and insignificant speck of protoplasm pitched against the infinite extent of the universe. It is true that modern physicists may have succeeded in proving that the universe itself is also finite, but that only makes matters worse, for now the universe shrinks to littleness and is pitched against the still more mysterious concept of *Nothingness*. This is not merely something infinite; it is something humanly inconceivable. Heidegger has devoted one of his most intriguing essays to an attempt — not to define the indefinable — but to define the negation of Being, Non-Being, or Nothingness.

So there we have the Little Man gazing into the abyss, and feeling — for he still retains an infinite capacity for sensation — not only very small, but terrified. That feeling is the original *Angst*, the dread or anguish, and if you do not feel *Angst* you cannot be an existentialist. I am going to suggest presently that we need not

¹ *Coleridge as Critic* (Faber, 1949), pp. 29-30.

necessarily feel *Angst*, but all existentialists do, and their philosophy begins in that fact. There are two fundamental reactions to *Angst*: we can say that the realization of man's insignificance in the universe can be met by a kind of despairful defiance. I may be insignificant, and my life a useless passion, but at least I can cock a snook at the whole show and prove the independence of my mind, my consciousness. Life obviously has no meaning, but let us pretend that it has. This pretence will at any rate give the individual a sense of responsibility: he can prove that he is a law unto himself, and he can even enter into agreement with his fellow-men about certain lines of conduct which, in this situation, they should all adopt. He is free to do this, and his freedom thus grows into a sense of responsibility. This is Sartre's doctrine, but he does not make very clear what would happen supposing he could not persuade his fellow-men to agree on certain lines of conduct, or certain values. I think he would probably say that a measure of agreement is ensured by our human predicament, that being what we are, when our existential situation is made clear, we are bound to act freely in a certain way. Our necessity becomes our freedom. But I am not sure about this. The characters in Sartre's novels and plays tend to act absurdly, or according to their psychological dispositions, and are not noticeably responsible to any ideal of social progress.

This aspect of existentialism seems to me to have a good deal in common with Vaihinger's philosophy of 'as if.' We cannot be sure that we are free, or that we are responsible for our own destiny, but we behave as if we were. And by a natural extension existentialism establishes a relationship with pragmatism – it is significant that many of Sartre's literary enthusiasms are American, and America is the home of pragmatism. But, from Sartre's point of view, pragmatism of any kind is too superficial: it is based on day to day procedures, a sort of balance sheet of success and failure, whereas the existentialist must for ever keep in view the terrifying nature of our human predicament. To that extent, perhaps, existentialism represents an advance in philosophical rectitude.

More profoundly still, the existentialists object to pragmatism and other such practical philosophies (including, as we shall see presently, marxism) on the ground that they are materialistic. Any form of materialism, by making human values dependent on economic or social conditions, deprives man of his freedom. Freedom is the capacity to rise above one's material environment. 'The possibility of detaching oneself from a situation in order to take a point of view concerning it (says Sartre) is precisely what we call freedom. No sort of materialism will ever explain this transcendence of a situation, followed by a turning back to it. A chain of causes and effects may well impel me to an action, or an attitude, which will

² Trans. *Partisan Review*.

itself be an effect and will modify the state of the world: it cannot cause me to turn back to my situation to apprehend it in its totality.²

That turning-back to a situation is the metaphysical act there is nothing in our environment to compel us to adopt a metaphysical attitude. That is a process of rising superior to our environment, of seeing things, of seeing all nature, from a point of view external to nature. The marxist may protest that that is all poppy-cock – there is no possibility of lifting ourselves outside nature by our own shoe-straps. But that is the crux of the whole question. The existentialist, it seems to me, is bound to assert that mankind has developed a special faculty, consciousness, or intellectual self awareness, which enables him to do precisely that trick. In this matter I am inclined to be on the side of the existentialist. The higher forms of animal consciousness are connected with this impulse to detachment – detachment from the herd, from society, from any situation including the situation of man *vis à vis* the universe. It can be argued with force that precisely such capacity for detachment is the cause of our social disease, our disunity, and aggressiveness; but it must also be admitted that our major advances in scientific thought are also due to the development and use of this same faculty. But there is a danger inherent in detachment which the existentialist fully realizes. It is the danger of idealism. In detachment we elaborate a philosophy, a social utopia, which has no relevance to the conditions we are at any moment living through. The existentialist therefore says that man, having experienced his sense of detachment or freedom, must throw himself back into the social context with the intention of changing those conditions. Hence the doctrine of engagement. To quote Sartre again: ‘Revolutionary man must be a contingent being, unjustifiable but free, entirely immersed in the society that oppresses him, but capable of transcending this society by his effort to change it. Idealism mystifies him in that it binds him by rights and values that are already given; it conceals from him his power to devise roads of his own. But materialism also mystifies him, by depriving him of his freedom. The revolutionary philosophy must be a philosophy of transcendence.’³

Before examining this doctrine from the point of view of marxism and anarchism, let us pause for a moment to examine the other typical reaction to *Angst*, the religious reaction, for that is an idealist attitude to which Sartre is also objecting. I am not sure that I can do justice to this attitude, but as it takes shape in the thought of Schelling, Coleridge, and Kierkegaard (and earlier still, in Saint Augustine), it seems to amount to this: We have the existential position – man confronted by the abyss of nothingness. It just does not make sense. Why am I here? Why all this complex structure, of which I am a part, a part become aware of itself? It is complete nonsense, but a simple hypothesis will make sense of it all: the prior ex-

³ Trans. *Partisan Review*.

istence of God. A transcendent creator responsible for the whole phantasmagoria of existence, responsible for me too, and my consciousness – how logical it all becomes! There may be difficult snags left over – the problems of evil and pain, for example – but a little ingenuity will soon get over them. We can't expect even a celestial omnibus to work without a little friction. And so we get, immensely elaborated, the mystical Christian existentialism of Kierkegaard and Gabriel Marcel. I am not suggesting that this is the point of view of the average Christian, or the average theist of any kind; they usually rely on revelation, on sacred scriptures and ecstatic illumination; but in so far as the religious point of view competes in the philosophical field, it is independent of these special pleas, and relies on logical argument. It is another philosophy of as if; it might be called the philosophy of only thus: only thus does our existence make sense. The sense, in such a case, is identical with what these philosophers call essence, and Sartre, if not Heidegger before him, has said that the fundamental thesis of existentialism is that existence precedes essence. Professor Ayer has attacked this proposition on logical grounds.⁴ 'Essence' has a confusing history as a philosophical term. It usually means what we can assert about anything apart from the mere fact of its existence (i.e. subsistence) the possibilities inherent in a thing: the Platonic Idea. Santayana, whose use of the term is a little peculiar, but nevertheless valuable in being what an avowed materialist can admit, defines the difference between existence and essence as that between what is always identical with itself and immutable and what, on the contrary, is in flux and indefinable. This agrees with Sartre's notion of contingency; it is essence which allows for the possibility of change in the world. Santayana has a pretty little myth to describe the relationship:

'Becoming, we might say, in the fierce struggle to generate he knew not what, begat Difference; and Difference, once born, astonished its parent by growing into a great swarm of Differences, until it exhibited all possible Differences, that is to say, until it exhibited the whole realm of essence. Up to that time Becoming, who was a brisk bold lusty Daemon, had thought himself the cock of the walk; but now, painful as it was for him to see any truth whatever, he couldn't help suspecting that he lived and moved only through ignorance, not being able to maintain the limitations of any moment nor to escape the limitations of the next, like a dancing Dervish that must lift one foot and then the other then the other from the burning coals.'⁵

That is by the way, but Santayana does bring out more clearly than any other philosopher I know the fact that it is by its very ideality, its non-existence, that

⁴ *Horizon*, July and August 1945. *Rationalist Annual*, 1948.

⁵ 'Apologia pro mente sua,' *The Philosophy of Santayana*. Ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (Northwestern University, Evanston, 1940), p. 526.

essence is inwardly linked with existence; it is not a mere extension or part of that which exists. I do not think Professor Ayer appreciates this point, but I would not like to argue it out with him, because it is not my point, nor one to which I attach particular importance. But it does explain why Sartre can support a notion like freedom without being committed to that kind of idealism which involves a whole system of absolute values. I do not think it would make much difference to Sartre's philosophy if for *freedom* we substituted the word *flux*. What we apprehend of the nature of things is subject to constant change, and the change is not so much inherent in the thing itself – in matter – as in our consciousness or apprehension of these essences. According to this view, essences do not change, neither do they subsist in space or time. They are merely there when we perceive them. They belong to the object, but can exist without its material presence, like the grin of the Cheshire cat in *Alice in Wonderland*.

Rousseau's mistake was to treat freedom as an essence, as an eternally subsisting value in mankind. Man is not in this sense 'born free.' He is born a mere bundle of flesh and bones, with freedom as one of the possibilities of his existence. The onus is on man to create the conditions of freedom. Now all this may seem to be of merely theoretical interest, but on the contrary this is where existentialism is making its greatest contribution to philosophy. It is eliminating all systems of idealism, all theories of life or being that subordinate man to an idea, to an abstraction of some sort. It is also eliminating all systems of materialism that subordinate man to the operation of physical and economic laws. It is saying that man is the reality not even man in the abstract, but the human person, you and I; and that everything else freedom, love, reason, God is a contingency depending on the will of the individual. In this respect existentialism has much in common with Max Stirner's egoism. An existentialist like Sartre differs from Stirner in that he is willing to engage the ego in certain super egoistic or idealistic aims. He has less in common with dialectical materialism which requires him to subordinate his personal freedom to political necessity; less still with Catholicism which requires him to subordinate his personal freedom to God. He seeks alliance with He seeks alliance with a militant humanism which by political and cultural means will in some unspecified way guarantee his personal freedom.

Let me admit at this stage of the argument that I find it possible to accept some of the fundamental principles of Sartre's existentialism. I believe, for example, that all philosophy must begin in subjectivity. There are certain concrete bases of experience – the so called scientific facts – to which we can give an existential reality, but though philosophy may use them as a jumping-off ground, they do not in themselves involve the acceptance of a particular philosophy. If they did, we should find all scientists professing the same philosophy, which is very far from being the case. Philosophy begins when we depart from existential facts and flounder about

in the realm of essences. In that realm our subjective faculties – intuition, aesthetic sensibility, the esemplastic power (as Coleridge called it) of subsuming the many under the one – with all these personal and uncertain means we begin to construct a philosophy. We should still be guided by practical reason, scientific method, and logic; but these are the methods and not the substance of our discourse (a fact often forgotten by the logical positivists). By virtue of this subjective activity, we reduce irrational essences into some kind of order, the order of a carefully constructed myth or fairy-tale (as in religion) or the order of a coherent utopia (as in political idealism).⁶

The rationalist and materialist may protest that we are merely trying to reduce everything to the terms of our romantic idealism, but we can turn on him and prove that his philosophical structure, in spite of the pseudo-scientific jargon in which it is expressed, is in no way different. It is a structure of reason, and it is idealistic in that it depends on *faith* – faith that tomorrow will be the same as today, faith that human beings will behave in a way he can calculate beforehand, faith in reason itself, which is, after all, only the means by which the scientist kids himself that he understands existence. Scientific method may be one thing, and productive of separately ascertained truths between which there can only be relative discontinuity, a chaos of atomized facts; or scientific method may be something quite different and move towards some ideal of harmony, of wholeness and order. But such harmony (the ideal of a Marx no less than of a Plato) is a subjective perception. The communist in this respect does not differ from the royalist or the anarchist; we are all idealists, and I do not see how we can be anything else so long as we believe that man is what he makes of himself. The difference is between those who believe that a particular ideal should predetermine man's existence (which is the official communist line) and those who believe (as the existentialists and anarchists do) that the personality of man, that is to say, his own subjectivity, is the existing reality and that the ideal is an essence towards which he projects himself, which he hopes to realize in the future, not by rational planning, but by inner subjective development. The essence can only be grasped from the particular stage of existence which you and I have at any particular moment reached. Hence the folly of all so-called 'blue-prints for the future'; the future will make its own prints, and they won't necessarily be blue.

To most people all this involves a sense of insecurity, as though they were sailing strange seas without a chart, perhaps even without a compass. But that, as Sartre has pointed out, is the whole point. He quotes Dostoevsky – 'if God did

⁶ The marxists pretend that their Utopia is scientific, but it is just as idealistic as any other projection of our constructive faculties into an unpredictable future; and by their day-to-day modifications of their plans, marxists as a matter of fact admit how idealistic their original conceptions must have been.

not exist, all would be permissible.' 'In fact,' admits Sartre, 'everything is permissible if God does not exist, and consequently man is adrift, because he cannot find, either within himself or without, anything to cling to. At first he is without excuses. If in fact existence precedes essence, one cannot explain things in terms of a given and fixed human nature; in other words, there is no determinism, man is free, man is freedom. On the other hand, if God does not exist, we do not find ready at hand values or formulas which will justify our conduct. Thus, neither in front of us nor behind us can we find, in the realm of values, justification or excuse. We are alone, without excuse.'⁷ Which is what Sartre means when he says that man is condemned to be free. In my metaphor, he is condemned to be adrift, and he has to invent the instruments by means of which he can steer a course; having invented these instruments, he has to set out on a voyage of discovery. He has no idea of where he will get to, where he will land himself. His life, his existence, is the voyage his reality is the fact that he is moving in a direction which he himself has freely determined.

For the moment I want to leave on one side the problem of agreement; for after all, we can't move about an ocean in separate boats; we are passengers on ships which contain many other people, and we have to reconcile our freedom of movement with theirs. We shall be in a better position to consider this problem when we have confronted existentialism and marxism.

In view of the association of the French existentialist writers with the resistance movement during the occupation, it is a little difficult to follow the usual practice and label existentialism as a philosophy of fascism, so it seems to have been agreed to damn it as Trotskyism. Anyone less of an existentialist than Trotsky it would be difficult to conceive, so it is equally difficult to see how an existentialist can be a Trotskyite: it is merely, of course, a convenient term of abuse. But the examination of existentialism made by George Lukács, whom I regard as the most intelligent marxist critic of our time, is more serious than such tactics would suggest.⁸ It is, of course, comparatively simple to establish a connection between fascist imperialism and the philosophy of Heidegger — the connection was historical and actual during the Nazi regime. But such an association might have been fortuitous it is difficult for a philosopher to resist the flattery which a totalitarian State seems willing to bestow on him. For philosophical purposes we must seek for some more fundamental connection, and this undoubtedly lies in the nihilism which is the philosophical disease of our time. Now nihilism is merely that condition of despair which I have already described, a despair that overcomes man whenever he looks into the abyss of nothingness and realizes his own insignificance. It is a condition

⁷ *L'existentialisme est un humanisme* (1946), pp. 36-7.

⁸ *Existentialisme ou marxisme?* (Nagel, Paris, 1948).

from which you can react in various ways: you can, of course, affirm its fundamental reality; you can remain a nihilist and refuse to believe in anything but your own selfish interests. You can react as Dostoevsky did, and become a pessimistic Christian, or you can react as the Nazis did and become a realistic power politician. Heidegger (and Sartre when it comes to his turn) reacts far more metaphysically he constructs an elaborate fire escape, a life saving apparatus by means of which man can escape from nihilism, though not denying that it still remains the fundamental nature of reality. Now that is precisely what the marxist cannot accept.

To begin with, what is this pessimistic nihilism but a reflection of the bankruptcy of the capitalist system? It has no reality the Nothingness which Heidegger and Sartre write about is a subjective state of mind. Lukacs calls it a typical fetish of bourgeois psychology, a myth created by a society condemned to death. Its existence is only made possible by an abandonment of reason, and this is a characteristic trend of modern philosophy, a trend that includes, not only Heidegger and Husserl, but also Dilthey and Bergson.

The marxist is really more existentialist than the existentialists. In theory (but not always in practice) he does not admit the existence of essences. There is only one reality, and it is historical, temporal. Man is an animal who evolved in historic time. At a certain stage in his evolution he developed the faculty of consciousness, but there is nothing mysterious about it, and its nature and scope will no doubt change again in the future. 'Man,' says Lukacs, 'has created himself by his work. When man finally winds up his pre-history and establishes socialism in a complete and definite form, then we shall see a fundamental transformation of the nature of man... Creating himself historically, transforming himself historically, man is naturally (*également*) attached to the world by certain constant factors (work and certain fixed relationships which arise out of it). But that does not in any way effect a compromise between such an objective dialectic of history and the timeless ontology of subjectivity. No compromise is possible between these two conceptions: it is necessary to make a choice. Nor is any compromise possible between the existentialist conception of freedom and the historical and dialectical unity of freedom and necessity established by marxism.⁹ Lukacs seems above all concerned to disallow the possibility of a third way in philosophy and politics. There is idealism and there is dialectical materialism; if you are not a dialectical materialist, you must be an idealist of some sort; if you are a dialectical materialist, you must be a marxist. I think this is playing with words. There is a fundamental opposition between a purely mechanistic materialism and all forms of idealism, but Lukacs, like most modern marxists, is very careful to dissociate himself from the mechanistic school. But as soon as materialism becomes dialectical, it associates itself

⁹ Op. cit., p. 203.

with contradictions, and the contradictions of matter are essences. You cannot be dialectical in thought or anything else unless you posit a realm of essence over against the realm of matter. But as soon as you admit a realm of essences, you give substantial existence to a state of subjectivity, for it is only in a state of subjectivity that we become aware of essences. If man had created himself merely by his work, he would have remained within a sensational and instinctual world, like the ant. The development of consciousness, which I agree with marxists in treating as an existential, historic event, means that subjective factors, essences, entered into the dialectical process; and only that fact can explain the evolution of man to his present moral and intellectual stature. And, of course, it is quite ridiculous to confine the evolutionary factors to work. The struggle for existence, especially in unfavourable climatic conditions, has always been a grim business. But the higher faculties of man, such as ethical consciousness, probably developed in temperate zones in Egypt and the Mediterranean basin and it was *play* rather than work which enabled man to evolve his higher faculties everything we mean by the word 'culture.' (Anyone who doubts this should read Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*.¹⁰ There is no aspect of culture – language, war, science, art, or philosophy, not even religion – in whose evolution play does not enter as the creative factor. Play is freedom, is disinterestedness, and it is only by virtue of disinterested free activity that man has created his cultural values. Perhaps it is this theory of all work and no play that has made the marxist such a very dull boy.

An animal at play – animals do play and man is only an animal that has learned to play more elaborately – an animal at play is not very conscious of *Angst*, of the existentialists abyss of nothingness. The existentialist and the marxist may retort that only a despicable character like Nero fiddles while Rome is burning, but considering the corruption of Rome at that time, there was perhaps something to be said for Neros playful disinterestedness. Nero, however, is really beside the point, which is the relevance of *Angst*. To the marxist the whole business – *Angst*, shipwreck, nothingness – is merely another myth, like the myth of the End of the World, or the Last Judgement. But the point of view I now want to bring forward, and recommend as the true one, admits the facts upon which the existentialist bases his *Angst*, but draws a different conclusion from them. There is no generally accepted name for this other fellow standing by the side of the existentialist on the edge of the abyss, but he has some resemblance to Aristotle. He surveys the scene, the little speck of protoplasm which is man, the universe, finite or infinite, on which he finds himself, and, if he thinks of the universe as finite, the dreaded gulf of nothingness beyond. His feelings are feelings of profound interest, excitement, wonder. He sees Fire and Air, Earth and Water, elementary qualities giving birth to

¹⁰ Routledge Kegan Paul, London, 1949.

all sorts of contrarities: hot-cold, dry-moist, heavy-light, hard-soft, viscous-brittle, rough-smooth, coarse-fine - sees these combining and inter-acting and producing worlds and life upon these worlds, and he is lost in wonder. His greatest wonder is reserved for the fact that he, man, stands on the apex of this complex structure, its crown of perfection, alone conscious of the coherence of the Whole.

I recommend, as an antidote to the existentialists, a reading not only of Aristotle, but also of Lucretius – particularly those passages where he breaks off from his description of the nature of things to praise Epicurus, the father of his philosophy, the discoverer of truth, who had parted the walls of the world asunder, so that we might see all things moving on through the void: ‘The quarters of Acheron are nowhere to be seen, nor yet is earth a barrier to prevent all things being descried, which are carried on underneath through the void below our feet. At these things, as it were, some godlike pleasure and thrill of awe seizes on me, to think that thus by thy power nature is made so clear and manifest, laid bare on every side.’ What Lucretius called ‘the fear of Acheron . . . clouding all things with the blackness of death, and suffering no pleasure to be pure and unalloyed’ is our familiar bogy *Angst*, and Lucretius’s great poem was written to dispel *Angst*. ‘For often ere now,’ he says, ‘men have betrayed country and beloved parents, seeking to shun the realms of Acheron. For even as children tremble and fear everything in blinding darkness, so we sometimes dread in the light things that are no whit more to be feared than what children shudder at in the dark, and imagine will come to pass. This terror of the mind then, this darkness, must needs be scattered not by the rays of the sun and the gleaming shafts of day, but by the outer view and the inner law of nature.’

Aristotle and Lucretius are not exceptions; there is throughout the history of philosophy a tradition that, while taking its origin in the same full look into the nature of things as the existentialists affect, is based on the completely contrary reaction – a reaction of curiosity rather than of shipwreck. It cannot be said that this positive reaction (or *resonance* as Wolterreck has called it¹¹) is any more unjustified, any less profound than the negative reaction of the existentialist. It is a question of what Santayana has called ‘animal faith,’ ‘an atheoretical force which, torn from the data of experience, constructs and guarantees and extends the world of man’ – or as Santayana puts it, ‘the life of reason.’¹²

Animal *faith*, faith in nature – I do not think the marxist likes the word faith – he is afraid of being committed to a god. I agree that it would be better to avoid the word God. As Santayana again has said: ‘If by calling nature God or the work

¹¹ *Ontologie des Lebendigen* (Stuttgart, 1940). The translations of passages from this book which follow have been kindly supplied by Mr. R. F. C. Hull.

¹² Antonio Banfi, ‘Crisis of Contemporary Philosophy,’ *The Philosophy of George Santayana* (Evanston, 1940), p. 482.

of God, or the language in which God speaks to us, nothing is meant except that nature is wonderful, unfathomed, alive, the course of our being, the sanction of morality, and the dispenser of happiness and misery there can be no objection to such alternative terms in the mouth of poets; but I think a philosopher should avoid the ambiguities which a too poetical term often comports. The word nature is poetical enough: it suggests sufficiently the generative and controlling function, the endless vitality and the changeful order of the world in which I live.¹³

The philosophy which I am trying to present – a philosophy based on a positive reaction to cosmic experience – might well be called humanism – it is an affirmation of the significance of our human destiny. Humanism is a term which Sartre has adopted and which even an intransigent marxist like Lukacs does not disdain – he calls the Leninist theory of knowledge a militant humanism (*un humanisme combatif*), but he qualifies this acceptance of the term by pointing out that the notion is inseparable from practical action and work. This brings me to the anarchist position, which only now, at the end of this long disquisition, can be revealed in all its logical clarity. Like the marxist – or should we say the leninist – the anarchist rejects the philosophical nihilism of the existentialist. He just doesn't feel that *Angst*, that dreadful shipwreck on the confines of the universe, from which the existentialist reacts with despairful energy. He agrees with the marxist that it is merely a modern myth. He draws in his metaphysical horns and explores the world of nature. He again finds himself agreeing with the leninist that life is a dialectical process the end of which is the conquest of what Lukacs calls *la totalite humaine*, which presumably means a world dominated by human values. But whereas the leninist conceives of this conquest in terms of a consciously directed struggle – practical action and work – the anarchist sees it in terms of mutual aid, of symbiosis.

Marxism is based on economics; anarchism on biology. Marxism still clings to an antiquated darwinism, and sees history and politics as illustrations of 'a struggle for existence between social classes. Anarchism does not deny the importance of such economic forces, but it insists that there is something still more important, the consciousness of an overriding human solidarity. 'It is,' says Kropotkin, 'the unconscious recognition of the force that is borrowed by each man from the practice of mutual aid; of the close dependency of everyone's happiness upon the happiness of all; and of the sense of justice, or equity, which brings the individual to consider the rights of every other individual as equal to his own. Upon this broad and necessary foundation the still higher moral feelings are developed.'¹⁴

¹³ *Scepticism and Animal Faith* (1923), pp. 237-8.

¹⁴ *Mutual Aid*, Introduction.

There is no need to repeat here the evidence from biology, anthropology, and social history which Kropotkin brought to the support of his thesis. Even the existentialist Sartre recognizes that the liberty he desires for himself implies that he must desire liberty for others. Even the marxist talks of human solidarity, to which capitalism is the only obstacle. But biology is not enough: we are self-conscious animals, animals conscious of 'being,' and we need a science of such consciousness: it is called ontology.

There is, that is to say, a science of existence which we call *biology*; there is a science of essence which we call *ontology*. The purpose of these two sciences is to determine the nature of the process of life and the place of our human existence in that total process. There are people who say that this cannot be done with the instruments of reason; that there is a Ground of Being only accessible to super rational intuition, and not understandable in the terms of rational thought. Some people regard that Ground of Being as transcendent, as more or less actively intervening in the development of existence, particularly in the unfolding of our human destiny; others treat it as merely an unknown quantity; still others, the materialists among us, deny its existence altogether. The point of view I have adopted myself is not dualistic; I do not recognize two orders of reality, known or unknown. Nor is my point of view materialistic in the marxist sense. I believe, in the words of Woltereck, that 'one stream of events embraces everything that can in any way be experienced as real: whether the events be material or non-material, a-biotic, organic, psychic, conscious or unconscious . . . The psychic or spiritual life of man is also part of this *one stream of events* we call Nature, even though under special names and with special contents: science, technics, civilization, politics, history and art. The organism "Man" produces these things in the last analysis no differently from the bird its song and the building of its nest, the tree its blossom and fruit. Also the dawning of consciousness, conscious acting and conscious thinking, are natural processes just like the reactions, instinctive acts and affects in the animal kingdom. The biologist does not make a distinction between physical events (Nature), and non physical events (Spirit): there is but one stream of events with as it were a visible (material) surface and a fluid (immaterial) depth, and this distinction between visible surface and fluid depth is, for me, the same distinction that Santayana makes between material existence and fluid essence. Santayana also says that essence is not an extension or a portion of that which exists, but that it is intimately interwoven with existence; meaning, I think, that there is this flexible Inside and Outside division, but no merging across this division. There is always a division between the gas inside a balloon and the atmosphere outside – they cannot mix, but they are intimately related as pressures, as specific gravities, and react in correspondence one with the other. Essence and existence are in this manner interwoven throughout the whole evolution of life. What is important to

emphasize in all this is the presence, throughout the one life process, of freedom. The presence of this element is indicated by the process of evolution itself, which is an upward process, leading from the elementary physical states of the cosmic nebulae to a biotic differentiation, then to simple and increasingly differentiated life, and finally to spiritual events, spiritual creativity and spiritual freedom.¹⁵ There has existed throughout the whole process of evolution an ability to move on to new planes of existence, to create novelty. Freedom is not an essence only available to the sensibility of man; it is germinatively *at work* in all living things as spontaneity and autoplasmicity. ‘This “biological” freedom and what becomes of it,’ (I am again quoting Woltereck) ‘has an ontic significance quite different from the “existential” compulsion of free decision. The latter *cripples* our sense of vitality and consequently the advancing life of man. The freedom of spontaneous events born of the ontic centre and the freedom to mould things in such and such a way enhances our sense of vitality and makes life more intense. The joy of creating things of value, self conquest (freeing the self from selfishness and its instincts), rising above the world, and finally the spontaneous creation of new forms, new norms, new ideas in the minds of individuals – all that is the possible result of man’s *positive freedom*.’

Freedom, says the marxist, is the knowledge of necessity. Freedom, says Engels, ‘consists in the control over ourselves and over external nature which is founded on knowledge of natural necessity it is therefore necessarily a product of historical development. The only thing wrong with this definition is that it is too narrow. The chick that is pecking its way out of its shell has no knowledge of natural necessity only a spontaneous instinct to behave in a way that will secure it freedom. It is an important distinction because it is the distinction underlying the marxist and the anarchist philosophies. From the anarchist point of view it is not sufficient to control ourselves and external nature; we must allow for *spontaneous* developments. Such opportunities occur only in an open society; they cannot develop in a closed society such as the marxists have established in Russia. There is also to be observed in Engels and Marx an essential confusion between freedom and liberty: what they mean by freedom is political liberty, man’s relations to his economic environment; freedom is the relation of man to the total life process.

I am afraid that these observations will seem somewhat irrelevant to the practical problems of life, but that is a dangerous assumption. Marxism as militant politics throughout the world today had its origins in such philosophical distinctions, and still today rests unshaken on such a philosophical basis. We cannot meet marxism and expect to overcome it unless we have a philosophy of equal force. I do not believe that any of the prevailing idealistic systems of philosophy will serve

¹⁵ Woltereck, op. cit.

our purpose the marxists have proved that they have weapons powerful enough to demolish that kind of structure. They have now shown that in their opinion existentialism does not constitute a danger to their philosophical position. I believe that another philosophical attitude is possible, and that it preserves the concept of freedom without which life becomes brutish. It is a materialistic philosophy, but it is also an idealist philosophy; a philosophy that combines existence and essence in dialectical counterplay.

If finally you ask me whether there is any necessary connection between this philosophy and anarchism, I would reply that in my opinion anarchism is the *only* political theory that combines an essentially revolutionary and contingent attitude with a philosophy of freedom. It is the only militant libertarian doctrine left in the world, and on its diffusion depends the progressive evolution of human consciousness and of humanity itself.

Notes

Library.Anarhija.Net



Herbert Read
Existentialism, Marxism and Anarchism
1949

Anarchy and Order: Essays in Politics

lib.anarhija.net