PROFESSOR OTTO FRIEDRICH BOLLNOW, UNIVERSITY OF TÜBINGEN

The Conquest of Existentialism*

We can take it for granted that everyone has some idea of what 'existentialism is. We can therefore content ourselves with giving a broad outline of it sufficient for the questions we are about to deal with. It is generally accepted that existentialism arises out of the dangerous menace to our whole intellectual life, known since the days of Nietzsche as European Nihilism. Once the belief in reason as the underlying principle of life was lost, intellectual life was deprived of its foundations. Every form of intellectual life transcending and supporting The individual had proved to be a deception. Thus man was lost in despair and abandoned to the mercy of a besieging frustration and destruction. Anxiety (l'angoisse) was the expression of his utter hopelessness. This anxiety is the more dangerous, since the more it attacks man the more vulnerable he becomes to these attacks.

It is only in the context of this general intellectual situation with its all-pervading anxiety, that one can understand the rise of existentialism. This should not be misinterpreted. It does not mean that existentialism itself is simply the expression of this anxiety. We must, however, grant that anxiety and doubt, boredom and more recently disgust as well, together with all such moods of dark depression, have attained an importance which they have never before enjoyed in the history of human thought. But these moods are important for existentialism not because man gives in to them, but because he faces them without attempting flight. When all external supports have collapsed, man makes his last stand in the central core of his personality. It is this which gives meaning to existentialism's characteristic conception of existence.

"Existence" means this innermost core of a man. This core not [p. 131/p. 132] merely survives undisturbed, but can only be experienced as a reality when everything man can possess or set his heart on in this world has either been lost or proved a deception. This experience is not only affected by worldly wealth, goods and social standing, health of body and the use of one's limbs but quite as much by the gifts and faculties of the mind as well as those virtues, so difficult to acquire, which are necessary for ethical life.

The core of the personality survives when all these other things have shown themselves to be externals which are not fundamental to man. This last centre, no longer definable by its contents, is indestructible in the midst of all destruction. Here man takes his stand. He seizes upon existence and with it, in the same indivisible process, the Absolute itself. Only by living through all anxieties and persevering to the very end can man achieve this last experience of being. Existence is not demonstrable by logical deductions, it is grasped by an act of experience.

Here we must pause. Despite the great significance that the threatening néant has in existentialist philosophy, it is nevertheless something quite different from what one means by nihilism. Existentialism finds in all destruction an Absolute. (Jaspers rightly points out that existing and transcending are only possible if linked together in one entire indivisible process.) But here its limitations become clear, for existentialist philosophy finds this absolute only in the centre of the individual soul, only in loneliness. There is no possibility of breaking the chains of loneliness, of achieving any sustaining relationship with, or relying on, any being beyond man.

Human life, however, cannot endure such a situation. Perhaps human existence must pass

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through this crisis of existentialist experience. Perhaps man may even be condemned to undergo it repeatedly, but mankind cannot remain in it permanently.

If one does not shut one's eyes to these things, only two possibilities remain: either one must recognize that purposeful human existence is impossible, and admit all the consequences of this, or one must recognize that purposeful human existence is possible in spite of all the pressure of existentialist experience. In this case one must acknowledge the presuppositions implied by this possibility for human life, and from here one must set out to the conquest of existentialism.

The first difficulty is how can man break loose from the chains of existentialist loneliness and achieve once more a supporting relationship with a reality outside himself? By such a supporting relation- [132/133] ship we may understand a connection with another human being, with a human community, with the institutions which have shaped the life of such a community. The world of thought, if fruitfully linked with life, or even a divine entity may provide man with such a relationship; in short, everything may do so that can give human life a meaning and purpose.

Such experience, in short, would lead from the pressure of the existentialist experience of desolation towards a new feeling of belonging. This new sense of belonging, we should perhaps say, will never completely dispel the existentialist experience of being menaced. It can only bridge over this experience on a higher plane, and therefore this sense of belonging must be something quite different from the unquestioning security of the naive.

Before following up the separate possibilities which promise to lead us in the desired direction, we might usefully orientate ourselves by some general considerations. This new relationship with reality, which we will define as we go on, we may here denote by trust.

By this Ave mean trust in a general sense, without particular implications. We do not understand by it trust in any particular being, but rather a general trust in life and the world, a trust without which any particularized trust is impossible. Such a general unparticularized trust arises from a deep sense of belonging. One could speak of "trust-in-life", life here including in its meaning both man and the universe. But it is perhaps better to avoid this term, correct though it is, since it can easily be understood in a subjective, psychological sense; we might instead speak of a "trust in being". In a similar sense we might speak of a "faith in being", if it were not for the danger of taking faith in a too narrow religious sense, while here we are concerned with experiences which come before any precise religious consummation.

We shall proceed from the assumption that such a "trust in being" is the necessary condition for human life. The loss of this trust cannot but lead to despair, to the whole critical existentialist experience. But this existentialist experience can only exist as a crisis, a moment of decision standing out against the background of life which is otherwise supported by trust in being. If the existentialist experience became continuous it would put an end lo life.

I would like to take two examples which seem rather arbitrary but which clearly illustrate the position. First, Alfred Nitschke, the paediatrician of the University of Tübingen, has impressively [133/134] demonstrated in the journal "Die Sammlung"[1] how important an atmosphere of trust is for the development of the very small child. Without it the child cannot develop, however favourable the outer circumstances may be. The child remains backward, stunted in body as well as mind, and finally withers away. It seems from this that all trust in the world in general and in life springs ultimately from a trust in some particular protecting human being; we shall bear this in mind in what follows. This basic condition may also be applied to all human life. An atmosphere of trust is necessary; without it no human life is possible.

[1] Alfred Nilschke: Angst und Vertrauen (Anxiety and Trust). In: Die Sammlung, Vol. VII (1052) p.175 ff.

There is, however, one difference between adult life and the life of the child: the child lives unquestioningly. Its trust, if destroyed, may be restored and the same unquestioning acceptance regained. The adult man's trust must, on the contrary, be maintained by constantly fighting off an ever renewed doubt; the adult must win his trust. Here we must face the question, how is man to acquire a new "trust in being" when his old trust has once been lost. The question is a difficult one, because it is very dubious whether after such a loss a man can regain trust by his conscious effort, or whether he must wait until it comes to him. In any case this new trust must be something quite different from the unquestioning trust of the child. It can only be maintained by constantly renewed efforts against the constantly renewed attacks of doubt. It stands out clearly as a fragile acquisition on a higher plane than anxiety and despair.

The second example is a paper in the journal "Psyche"[2] by the present Heidelberg specialist in internal medicine, Herbert Plügge. Plügge here discusses cases of suicide which he has come across in his clinical experience and arrives at the conclusion (hat only in the rarest cases is it possible to trace a cause sufficient to explain the decision to commit suicide. Far more often there was a general disruption of the emotional relationship with the surrounding world, a disruption which he designates as a loss of hope. This disruption together with a very minor cause may lead to attempted suicide.

The important thing is the way in which Plügge defines hope and its loss in this context. He does not speak of this or that particular hope, of hope for any particular visualizable event, but of a deeper hope without definable objective, a hope which is a relationship with life in general. Here we have hope also distinguished as the [134/135] condition which makes life possible. In opposing hope to despair in this way we have the basis for a refutation of existentialism. Or, more precisely, we shall approach the same problem again but from a different angle. More accurately still it is a new turn which leads us back to the problem we originally approached from the discussion of trust, for hope is trust in the future, it is the time aspect of what we have so far been calling trust. This trust is the fundamental relationship. It is not bound by the present. It determines our relation to the ground of being. It is completely different and infinitely deeper than a> superficial trust in good fortune. In this context it is important to remember the argument in exactly the same direction undertaken by Gabriel Marcel in his "Sketch of a Phenomenology and Metaphysic of Hope"[3]. He too describes hope as the "act by which this tendency (towards despair) is actively and vigorously overcome". In this context he stresses that the conquest of despair does not come to man as a gift, and still less without thought, but must be achieved by strenuous action.

By these terms "trust" and "hope" and "faith in being" we have denoted what we mean when we assert that the question of conquering existentialism is one of finding a new trust for man. But opposed to our view is the contrary argument. How can we to-day purposefully struggle to gain a new trust after we have so overwhelmingly experienced complete spiritual desolation? Have we not found that each effort to regain trust is merely an escape from the relentlessness of this desolation, a flight into illusion just when we thought we had overcome the desire for flight? Perhaps at this point I might be allowed to say, by way of illustration not proof, that we find in our times, particularly in poetry, the emergence of a grateful feeling of "trust in being". We must always reckon with the possibility of our poets being in some sense forerunners of a subsequent philosophical movement. Unhindered by the intractability of systematized thought, they sense the movement of life more quickly than philosophers, and thus may point to the future developments of philosophy. It is for this reason that it seems so important, that, after all the dangers and horrors we have witnessed, poetry should begin to express a new feeling, a thankful affirmation of life; our poets have begun to convey a joyful

[2] Herbert Plügge: Psyche, Vol. V (1951) p. 433 ff.
[3] Gabriel Marcel, Homo viator, Paris 1944.

and positive acceptance of the poet's own life as well as the life of mankind and the world in general, as the poet sees it. Two poets in particular ought to be mentioned: Rilke and Bergengruen. Bergengruen's new volume of [135/136] poetry "The Universe is One" ("Die heile Welt") closes with this affirmation[4]:

> What arose from suffering
> Passed away
> And my ear caught only
> A song of praise.

There is a feeling of thankfulness here, and Bergengruen is certainly not a man whom one could accuse of facile optimism. He joins Rilke in this deep feeling of thankfulness. Rilke was able to say at the end of his course[55]:

> Everything breathes and thanks,
> O miseries of night, how you sank traceless away!

Rilke is in this connection especially important, for he passed through the abyss of existentialist despair as no other did. Thus it is important that in the last, and until now neglected, works which he wrote after the completion of the "Duino Elegies", Rilke should have achieved such a victory. He is here imbued with a deep feeling of joy, at rest in the totality of being. He wrote lines which seem to penetrate deeply into the experience we are here discussing. "Every being is its own fulfilment", as he says in these works. The sentences which are accepted as Rilke's last pronouncement are relevant to this: "The word we utter next to last may be one of misery but the last of all should be beautiful." The "Elegies" represent such a word of misery, misère as it is called in the original French text, where one may understand the term in the full force given it by Pascal. But this new knowledge shows the "Elegies" lo be only a penultimate word outmoded and corrected by the very last word which should be beautiful, i. e. a word of joyful assent. This is precisely our problem in the conquest of existentialism.

But once again the argument is put forward, have we not treated the question too superficially? Is this not merely the personal testimony of two individual poets? What reason have we for reading philosophical seriousness into these poetical utterances? In so far [136/137] as they are the utterances of the poet alone they can certainly claim no general validity. But they may nevertheless contain the first groping signs of a newly developing awareness which may lead to a way out of the existentialist crisis.

We have demonstrated that a new sense of belonging is an indispensable precondition for overcoming existentialism. We are now faced for the first time with the philosophical questions proper. In what way can we attain this end, i. e. how can man, lost in fear and despair, torn from the supporting framework of life and thrown back into his filial loneliness, achieve a new trust in his surroundings? The problem is very complicated: I will try briefly to draw out a few of the most important points.

1. We might set out, as I have done in an earlier paper, from the assumption that all the depressing moods which lie at the root of existentialist philosophy have this in common: they shut men off from the world and shut them up in themselves. All intense suffering, all heartfelt despair throws man back into the same loneliness. Conversely if man can once more open himself to the world, and if the world once more becomes accessible to him, then he must have achieved a happy slate of mind. This happiness is not caused by any particular event. I am here using the term happiness in a very general sense, because I want to cover by it a large

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[4] cf. O. F. Bollnow: Friedrich Georg .Jüngcr — Werner Bergengruen. Zwei Dichter der neuen Geborgenheit (F. G. .Jünger — W. Bergengruen. Two Poets of a New Affirmation of Existence). In: Unruhe und Geborgenheit im Weltbild neuerer Dichter (Despair and Confidence in the Outlook of Modern Poetry). Stuttgart 1953.

[5] Transl. from the French original, cf. O. F. Bollnow: Das Weltbild des reifen Rilke (The Outlook of the mature Rilke), Universitas (German Edtn.) Vol. VII (1952) p. 681 ff. also: Rilke, Stuttgart 1951, p. 335 ff.

number of quite distinct moods.

Let us for the moment accept the gross oversimplification that there are two fundamental types of human slates of mind, the depressed and the exalted, the tormented and the happy[6]. To this polarity corresponds exactly the other polarity between being shut in oneself and being open and receptive to the world. On the one hand man may be completely shut up in himself and cut off from all concern for the outer world. On the other hand he may open himself and then for the first time he gives himself the possibility of experiencing a reality outside himself. The question of a reality supporting man from outside is in some way linked with the basis of happy states of mind. This, of course, in no way solves the difficulty, but it at least gives a very general direction in which a solution may be sought.

2. Jacobi, relying on a thought of Hume's, has already drawn attention to the fact that an external reality, even the reality of simple sense objects, cannot in any way be proved, but can only [137/138] he seized upon by an act of faith. This is even more true of a spiritual reality. This idea will he of assistance to us in our present context. If we have up to now spoken of a "supporting" reality we mean by-it one which is not an external limitation to human life but one upon which man may build and rely. A "supporting" reality here means a reliable foothold on which man can stand, a firm (Archimedean) point outside him which alone makes individual life possible. And here the axiom is valid that such a reality can only be approached in one way, the way Jacobi called faith.

3. Man, however, first encounters such a supporting reality and is enabled to go beyond despair, when he contacts a fellow human being who receives him in brotherhood. It is here that all further considerations must begin. It is, however, certainly untrue that existentialism has ignored human fellowship. On the contrary it is existentialism's great merit to have replaced the idealistic departure from consciousness by a departure from the linking of man with the world of man. But the world of human society remains a diffuse background, the world of the masses, against which each existentialist development must be set off. Fellow men are not seen as supporters, helpers, aids lo one's development. And Ibis is the reason we ask for the nature of those relationships which are truly human. Buber above all has always emphasized this. Marcel has distinguished between a genuine living relationship and a merely external acquaintance in a simple formula, the transition from "It" to "You". In the first case, that of "It", man differs in no way from any other creature; he is an animal mechanism impelled solely by desires and egoism, and subject to the laws of causality like any other product of natural processes. This is man as seen by the psychologist and by those who approach the study of human character from a physical basis.

In the second case, that of the genuine "You", man is looked upon as capable of freedom and goodness, as a being who may help and be relied upon, a being upon whose good faith I can reckon. And here again it is important that this certainty of another man's reliability is not fundamentally arrived at from uninteresting evidence or by any overcoming of doubt through the sifting of evidence. It can only be arrived at by what we have called above, not too precisely, an act of faith or trust. This certainty is only possible if I enter into a real relationship with the other man, if I "engage" myself, as the French put it, risk myself in this "engagement". This only happens in a concrete relationship of love. No [138/139] knowledge whatever of other men can be gained without taking the risk of giving one's love.

However, when such a relationship is established, then a new world is opened out in love. Not only the image of the other person, but also the entire world is utterly changed. Scheler w«s possibly the first to remark that certain ultimate experiences of being are only accessible for the man who loves. Love is therefore a means to metaphysical knowledge. Since Scheler's

[6] O. F. Bollnow: Das Wesen der Stimmungen (Stales of Mind: Their Nature and Their Causes), 3rd. Edtn. Frankfort/Main 1956.

lime Binswanger[7] has further explored and demonstrated how the world in a wonderfully concrete way seems supporting and protecting to one in such a relationship. The whole world is then seen in a new perfection. But it all depends upon our not regarding these experiences as subjective delusions but taking them seriously as genuine experiences of the nature of existence.

Thus beyond all the destruction and all the dangers, deeper experiences have found an integral and reliable 'esse' in which man can feel himself protected despite all the disturbances of existence. This does not mean that he does not know or that he underestimates the danger. This is why we have constantly emphasized that the experience of existence is not suspended but simply transmuted by new and deeper experiences. The concept of 'wholeness' serves to describe this ground which is indestructable in all destruction. This we have seen independently experienced and expressed by the poets from which we have quoted. The fact of knowing this sacred ground or basis of the world makes a man comforted[8]. From such a sense of being comforted there springs the feeling of a new sense of belonging, a sense of belonging which cannot be mistaken for naive security, a sense of belonging which has surmounted the existentialist experience in a higher achievement.

[7] L. Binswanger: Grundformen und Erkenntnis menschlichen Daseins (Basic Patterns of Human Existence and Their Study), Zurich 1942.

[8] cf. O. F. Bollnow: Von der Tugend des Getrost-seins (On the Virtue of Confidence). In: Neue Geborgenheit. Das Problem einer Oberwindung des Existentialismus (New Confidence. The Problem of the Conquest of Existentialism), Stuttgart 1955, p. 65 ff.