PhD Thesis: The Existential Philosophical Approach: Basic Concepts

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2. KEYWORDS

Existentialism, postmodernism, nihilism, literature, phenomenology of affects, theology, psychology, humanism, antihumanism, anxiety, fear, authenticity, bad faith, they-self, death, alienation, freedom, contingency, practical philosophy, hope, compassion, project, facticity, ethics, individualism, being, Dasein, anti-Platonism, transcendence, absurd, religious stage, interdisciplinarity, pop culture, postexistentialism, nothingness.

3. SYNTHESIS

My PhD thesis intends to cover a gap in the Romanian cultural space from three perspectives:

Firstly, Heidegger and Sartre were analyzed in a strictly phenomenological context, which is not exactly true to their philosophies, because their main works, *Being and Time* (1927) and *Being and Nothingness* (1943) are real existentialist manifestos, marking the transition from Husserlian phenomenology to an existentialist phenomenology. Although complete author series dedicated to Nietzsche and Kierkegaard were started (only the first six volumes from the Colli-Montinari Nietzsche edition, leaving out the seminal posthumous work and four dedicated to Kierkegaard), there are in Romania few studies devoted to these existentialist philosophers and even fewer studies of comparative philosophy, which would approach them from an existentialist point of view.

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Secondly, because of the national and international philosophical context, which pays tribute to postmodernism (the dominant paradigm in a number of fields, from sociology to philosophy of film), philosophers, critics and cultural theorists are no longer perceptive to an existential reading key, which would probably highlight better the hermeneutics of many works of art from out time. There are only few studies which propose a comparison between Sartre, Heidegger şi Kierkegaard, on one hand and Foucault, Baudrillard, Žižek, on the other. My thesis opens up this direction of interpretation, because existentialism was considered from a postmodern point of view.

Thirdly, the few books which fragmentarily considered existentialism in Romanism either ignored its relationship with postmodernism, or they focused on the French cultural space. I was mainly interested in the American scholarship because starting with the 1990's a number of studies have been written which understand the "truth" of existentialism in a post-structuralist context; I was interested also in the German scholarship, which has a deeper knowledge of the philosophy of existence, life philosophy and marginal pre-existentialist writers like Feuerbach and Stirner and has a superior hermeneutical skill in the analysis of the history of philosophy from Hegel to Kierkegaard, from Schopenhauer to Nietzsche, from Dilthey to Heidegger and from Scheler to Japsers.

Although in the Romanian academic space, phenomenology "boomed" after 1989, being studied and analyzed with great results, the existential derivation of phenomenology was rather ignored. As I was saying, Heidegger was interpreted mainly as a phenomenologist and Sartre was from the start considered insignificant, probably due to his political convictions. Sartre was known in postwar Romania as a novelist and dramatist; however, *Being and Nothingness* (1943) was translated only in 2004 (an useful and necessary translation unfortunately *lacking* a critical apparatus similar to Heidegger's translation from Humanitas Publisher House) and his important book, *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960) where the existential approach is combined with a Marxist point of view, a book which was recently reedited in English by Frederic Jameson, is not at all known in Romania (the same must be told for *The Notebooks For An Ethics*, written by Sartre between 1947 and 1948 and published in France in 1983, which is not yet translated in Romanian).

There is a single book exhaustively dedicated to existentialism in Romania published after 1989, *The French Existentialism* by Andrei-Iustin Hossu, (Institutul European, 1996, 2006). (I must say that the book was conceived in 1980 and defended as a PhD thesis in 1982.) My thesis intends to complete and update the Romanian existential hermeneutics from a number of perspectives:

- a) Because Hossu's book is devoted to political philosophy, my thesis approaches existentialism from the perspective of its "hard" concepts, focusing especially on philosophical existentialism but always taking into account literary existentialism.
- b) Because Hossu's book is devoted to French existentialism, my thesis takes a more general approach, considering important historical liaisons with the first Existentialist writers (Kierkegaard and Nietzsche) and with German philosophy of the existence (Jaspers and Löwith), a trend which influenced one of the Romanian marginal existentialists (Emil Cioran).
- c) Because the researcher from Cluj initiates a hermeneutical apparatus based on Mounier's personalism (1946), I tried to focus on the recent discussion about existentialism (1990-2011), which comes from the American cultural space, where existentialism is analyzed in comparison with postmodernism.

Although the Anglo-Saxon space did not produce a single Existentialist philosopher (with the possible exception of Colin Wilson), great interpreters of this trend come especially from America. One of them, Robert Solomon observed in his classes from Austin University that "although the movement began in Europe, its real home now is in America. American ideas of self-improvement and mobility share much with existentialism".

There are two distinct timelines of the existentialist bibliography, which interests me. The first (1940-1970) is the "hot" timeline of existentialism, when existentialism was either the dominant philosophy of the moment, or reconciled with structuralism or analytic philosophy. Thinking of this determined *Zeitgeist*, George Pattison surprisingly remarked in *Anxious Angels* that in the 1950's existentialism was supposed to solve "all philosophical problems". The second timeline (1990-2011) is the "cold" timeline of existentialism, when this trend is discussed in comparison with postmodernism: the initial excesses are tempered in favor of an "eagle eye" perspective that analyses the presuppositions of existential philosophy in counterpoint with basic postmodern relativism. We do not live in an existential world, as Karl Löwith argued, we live in the ideological universe of an extreme postmodernism, able to empathize with the existential heritage though.

My research starts from a conceptual analysis of existentialism. Three basic concepts (anxiety, authenticity and death) and three major existentialist philosophers (Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Sartre) mainly interest me. The three concepts from above have an interdisciplinary intentionality (with multiple applications in psychology, theology and literature) and are inter-related, each them offering a hint about the other ones and the

existential *corpus*. Mostly, I operate with a comparative analysis of texts: my approach covers, with its trait of existential hermeneutics or analysis of existential phenomenology a chapter from the history of ideas. From a practical point of view, I understand existentialism as a part of the European cultural heritage, which still has viable traits that could act as an inspiration for the existing subject immersed in contemporary society. From the perspective of the history of ideas I was basically interested on how existentialism cohabited with nihilism and postmodernism.

Exploring the liaisons between existentialism, postmodernism and nihilism, one can observe that certain theories, which seem outdated now, could re-enter in the market of contemporary ideas. Having studied the nihilist paradigm from Schopenhauer to Cioran, I had the impression that the nihilist orientation is particularly reductive. I wanted to explore the affective dimension of initially mental concepts: I had the impression that affects could be more persuasive and more eloquent than the cogitations and theories (existentialism can be understood as a *phenomenology of affects*). Because I was interested in literature, psychology, the philosophy of film, which sometimes focus on the meta-rational part of the discourse (transcending language and thought), I conceived the affective as a possible *double* of the mental.

One can note right from the start a very interesting issue: Kierkegaard and Nietzsche (and partially Schopenhauer) could be classed both as existentialists and nihilists. Moreover, the two philosophers enjoy an important postmodern reception. Only one example for Kierkegaard: the book *Kierkegaard in Post/ Modernity* (1994), edited by Martin J. Matuštik and Merold Westphal. Nietzsche has had a formidable reception due to phenomenological, structuralist and post-structuralist criticism (to name only a few of the Nietzscheans: Deleuze, Foucault, Baudrillard, Onfray, Haar). We might ask ourselves: how would the new French philosophy look without Heidegger and Nietzsche?

My general objective is to explain and reconstruct existentialism from its concepts; my secondary objective is to rethink existentialism through postmodernism. The specific objectives, which help me reach this general goal, are:

- 1) Reconstructing existentialism through its diverse definitions;
- 2) The debate between Sartre and Heidegger in the precedence of existence over essence;
- 3) The conflict between existentialist humanism and postmodern antihumanism;
- 4) The phenomenological connection between anxiety and fear (and the interdisciplinary link between philosophy and psychology);

- 5) The ability of anxiety to transcend the basic psychological intentionality and to function, therefore, as an ontological affect;
- 6) The possibility of functioning of authenticity as a personal virtue;
- 7) The relationship between being towards death and the existent, who cannot really live unless he embraces his mortality;
- 8) The observation that some existential ideas can act as a corrective to postmodern philosophy.

From a historical perspective, when post-structuralism replaced existentialism in the 1960's, something essential for the European contemporary culture was lost and resistance zones were created in marginal cultural areas: literature, film and psychology. To simplify, one could say that system replaced individual. The subject has been already weakened by Nietzsche, and it is a known fact that the death of the subject began with the death of God. The concept of the individual, however obsolete today, cannot be obliterated from history. Even if one conceived a narrative or an alternative ego, I do not believe one can renounce the concept of the individual. In cultural history the existential treatment of the individual is only the most recent one, not the only one: romanticism, German idealism, transcendentalism and American pragmatism are known philosophies of the *ego*.

The concepts with a categorical value of existentialism have recently developed an interesting posterity. We can observe how they became valid in different fields, like psychotherapy and the philosophy of film. One can ask himself: what is the connection between authenticity and simulation? Or the one between death and the feeling of a wasted life? The connection between anxiety and everyday fear? What is the relevance of these concepts *now*? Starting from the primacy of practical philosophy of existentialism, which makes philosophy relevant in everyday life, one can ask himself: how can the existential categories help me as an individual or "us" as a community?

Starting with the first concept: how is *anxiety* relevant? From a theoretical perspective, anxiety is essential, because through anxiety we have direct access to authenticity, individuality and existential death and we break through from the sphere of the *they self*, no longer thinking like simulacra or clones, no longer thinking like we imagine the others think. From a practical perspective, from the hermeneutics of this concept we can directly understand our anguish regarding terrorism, the melancholic and anguishing solitude of a soldier in Iraq (as Renata Salecl argued) but also fear of unemployment (Adorno) or the anxiety and isolation of the immigrant, who resides between two worlds and who does not belong to none of them. Moreover, one can understand the phenomenology of a panic attack

and reading through the major existentialist texts one can see if one should fight psychological anxiety or use it. Anxiety is a concept which originally belongs to many fields of research: philosophy, psychology, literature, sociology, film, theater, etc. Further exploring the practical perspective, we can experience the anxiety that we have failed to be accomplished in life, that we have wasted our existence, that an "unlived life" was true hell. In a basic way, we can conceive anxiety as a "fear of fear", which has a viral reproduction capacity and which, paradoxically, is intensified by the proximity of consciousness.

Death must be conceived from life's perspective: we are more alive when we are aware of our own mortality. When we know there is a limit, a certain moment, when our own existence will have stopped, life becomes as a race for the creation of a personal meaning, a quest for *realisatio* and transformation and the immanent pursuit of excellence.

Especially *authenticity* can be reconstructed: perhaps we should find that it is pretentious for a person to aspire today towards authenticity, but if we understood authenticity in an Emersonian way as a personal truth or if we read the existentialists and saw that authenticity is an unstable virtue (almost impossible), we might believe that the cult of authenticity is almost *necessary*. Authenticity is an x, one should cultivate: we ourselves should be the owners and the creators of our own lives; authenticity, independence and autonomy are inter-related. The three concepts from above are, therefore, important from a psychological point of view (the individual dimension) and from a sociological point of view (the trans-subjective dimension).

The first part of the thesis approaches the functioning principle of existentialism (I will also sketch certain parallels with nihilism and postmodernism). I start from its multiple definitions (1.1.1) from the American, English, German, French culture, which I later systematize and synthesize, culminating with a personal conceptual definition of existentialism. The conflict between existence and essence (1.1.2) receives a new solution in the history of philosophy, which emphasizes actually the particularity and the presupposed contingency of the human existent. Exploring the texts of the humanistic "polemics" (1.2.1), Existentialism and Humanism by Sartre and The Brief Upon "Humanism" by Heidegger, I understand more about the distinction between existence and being. Investigating antihumanism (1.2.2), I observe the configuration of nihilist antihumanism before Foucault and Deleuze, in the philosophies of Nietzsche and Cioran and in the poetry of Lautréamont.

In the second part I will study the three basic concepts (anxiety, authenticity, death). Starting from the conceptual definitions (note: I have added personal definitions as well), I have explored the teleology of these concepts in the main texts and in recent bibliography.

The first chapter of the second part (2.1) deals with anxiety. It seemed necessary to speak of the pseudonyms of Kierkegaard (2.1.2.1), a fragment that serves as an introduction also. The relationship between anxiety and Genesis (2.1.2.3) from the *Concept of Anxiety* was further analyzed. I continued with the phenomenological distinction between anxiety and fear (2.1.3), anxiety and nothingness (2.1.4) and anxiety and courage (2.1.5) from a theological perspective.

The second chapter of the second part (2.2) deals with the phenomenology of death at Heidegger, Fink and Levinas (2.2.2) and Sartre's reply (2.2.3) which emphasizes the contingency of death. The third chapter of the second part (2.3) wants to study a concept related to anxiety and death, the personal virtue of authenticity. Before closely researching the texts of the existentialist authors, I have looked upon the link between authenticity and falseness (2.3.1.2) in a psychological context. I have continued with the difficult and important problem of religious authenticity (2.3.2) from *Fear and Trembling* by Kierkegaard. Heidegger's (2.3.3) and Sartre's (2.3.4) discussion of authenticity followed, focusing especially on the two versions of existential inauthenticity, *they self* (2.3.3.1) and *bad faith* (2.3.4.1): I have further explored bad faith in connection with violence and nihilism (2.3.4.2), following Sartre's analysis from *Notebooks For An Ethics*.

After stating my conclusions, I have outlined several experimental directions, which come from my "philosophical lab" and seek to complete my research. The first appendix offers a glossary of existentialist concepts (which can ease the understanding of certain existential key terms), the second appendix illustrates a chronology, the third appendix having also an educative role, offering some diagrams. The fourth appendix deals with the work of Chuck Palahniuk, which stands at the confluence of existentialism, nihilism and postmodernism. A parallel with the existentialist and postmodern subject is to be found in the fifth appendix and a comparison between Kierkegaard and Cioran in the sixth from the point of view of the phenomenology of *agony*. The seventh appendix investigates the application of the method of *diagnosis* to existentialism and the eigt and final one sketches the concept of postexistentialism.

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