

EXISTENTIAL PHILOSOPHY FOR TIMES OF CHANGE AND CRISIS



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ABSTRACTS

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SESSION 1: WITTGENSTEIN AND BEYOND

‘Wittgenstein, Camus and Kierkegaard: Similarities and Differences in their Approach Toward an Ethical Way of Life’

Ilse Somavilla (Forschungsinstitut Brenner-Archiv, Universität Innsbruck)

In my paper I will discuss three philosophers of the past who have been involved with ethics and thus various ways of an ethical way of life in order to sustain in a world endangered by moral decline, lack of freedom, illness and distress; to put it in the words of Camus – in a world of absurdity. Even though these philosophers have different approaches toward an ethical way of life as well as toward the concept of freedom, they do have more in common than would appear at first and superficial sight. Kierkegaard, a decidedly existentialist thinker, can be compared with Wittgenstein in several ways: in his attitude toward language and its limits – the balance between speaking and keeping silent as a necessity for essentially acting – and in the conviction that God cannot be grasped by intellect, but only by the venture of believing, by the passions of the heart. The lack of keeping silent and thus lack of inwardness was both characteristic of the society in Kierkegaard’s as well as in Wittgenstein’s and our times. In contrast to the tendency of the ‘great stream of European and American civilization’ and its striving for progress and personal purposes, Wittgenstein aims at clarity and transparency as ‘an end in itself’ (C&V, 9e). Although in general not seen as an existentialist, I contend that Wittgenstein preoccupied himself with decidedly existentialist questions, in particular observable in his diary entries often written in code and in a passionate tone revealing his sufferings in his struggle for moral integrity up to perfectness. Camus, deeply moved by the misery of the world, doubted the existence of a divine being that would tolerate the absurdity of the *conditio humana*. However, as exemplified in his novel *La Peste*, he saw a way to come to terms with the absurdity of life – in an attitude of solidarity with the sufferings of mankind. Insofar the term ‘*révolte*’ used by Camus, leads to the act of taking part in responsibility and compassion. To summarize, I want to emphasize the significance of an ethical way of life in order to survive in times of crises. A life of contemplation and renunciation in contrast to greedy consumption, unlimited progress and exploitation of both nature and minorities of men. And thus, thinkers like Kierkegaard, Camus and Wittgenstein might serve as examples, as they did not spread theories by empty words, but pursued their ideas in a passionate and radical way hardly found with other philosophers or authors.

‘Wittgenstein and a radical change of worldview’

Jakub Gomulka (Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Pedagogical University of Kraków)

One of Wittgenstein’s famous fictitious stories is a tale about a king who believes that the world had not existed prior to his birth. It appears in the course of considering problems that are invoked by G. E. Moore’s proof of an external world. Wittgenstein imagines that Moore meets the king and tries to demonstrate him one of his certainties: that the Earth existed long before his birth. But for the king to be convinced, he would have to ‘be brought to look at the world in a different way’, says Wittgenstein, suggesting that Moore would eventually be in a position to change the king’s mind, though he would not be able to utilise any of his intra-systemic arguments to support his view (*On Certainty*, §92). What could the English philosopher use as his last resort? Would it be a sort of rational argumentation in a broader sense, or just manipulation which is, ultimately, a form of violence? The problem seems abstract, but it can serve as a model for common true-life situations. Our intra-systemic arguments often fall short in disputes with individuals who hold different views on, say, refugees, basic income, liberal democracy, etc. Therefore, we should rather assume that we deal with a certain plurality of systems of rational justification in a sense of Wittgenstein’s king example. A possible change of mind of our opponents would require (or provoke) a radical change of their worldviews. I believe – and this is also suggested by the later Wittgenstein – that there is a space between systemic rationality and sheer manipulation. What occupies this space is a broader form of rationality rooted in practice and

people's everyday existence. I will attempt to outline this rationality and its links to Wittgenstein's semi-technical terms of *Menschenkenntnis* and *primitive Reaktionen*. One of my major questions is to what extent Wittgenstein's thought favours conservative worldviews and whether it can serve as an inspiration for progressive approaches.

'Equality without foundations'

Geraldine Ng (Philosophy Lab CIC)

This paper discusses the principle of basic equality with the purpose of explaining equality without reference to foundations. It is widely recognised that the principle of basic equality, the moral claim of persons to "equal concern and respect", is the fundamental assumption of any reasonable conception of justice. It is also widely observed that the principle of equality does not rest on solid philosophical foundations. I will explain how Ludwig Wittgenstein's later method of the use of philosophical clarificatory models can help resolve problems that arise in connection with more traditional foundational approaches to moral justification. Foundationalism about moral concepts in general concerns their necessary and universal characteristics without which our moral concepts cannot be recognised as justified. This gives rise to a dilemma: in claiming basic equality we risk implausibility on the one hand, and vacuity on the other. We encounter the horn of implausibility if the claim of equality fails to do justice to the manifold partial concerns that make up a meaningful rich and human life. Understood weakly, however, we encounter the horn of vacuity. An alternative way of understanding a philosophical account of equality, following Wittgenstein, is to see a philosophical account as a model. A model is useful as a "mode of representing the object of philosophical investigation". (Kuusela 2019: 30) A Wittgensteinian interpretation of the role or function of a philosophical account of equality promises a way out of the dilemma that arises from attempting to defend claims about what all cases of equality must be. Wittgenstein's method of perspicuous representation encourages a broad contextual and historical approach to political philosophy. It can free us from traditional ways of conceptualizing the problem and its solutions that are often deeply sedimented and assumed to be necessary and universal. Wittgenstein's philosophy can change our conventional way of looking at the problems in which we are entangled and enable us to think differently about them. The question of the foundations of equality is one such entanglement.

SESSION 2: CRISIS AND RESPONSE

'We should rather rebel, than go back to normal. On the ethical importance of rebellion in our contemporary «Oran»'

Maciej Kałuża (Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Pedagogical University of Kraków)

In a recent essay, David Pathé-Camus wrote about the extraordinary popularity of *The Plague*, read frequently during the pandemic. He said something exceptionally significant: the people of Oran, freed from their epidemic, had the external—unaffected—world as a point of reference for their struggles. I would like to start with that remark in rethinking the existential perspective of the contemporary, ethical situation of our civilization. It seems plausible to assume that our 'Oran' does not have an actual, transcendent point of reference. The changes that had already occurred in 2020 are global. And as a defence mechanism we seem to think in a wrong direction, as many of us repeat, that after this is all over, we will be 'going back to normal'. Accidentally, there is an unfortunate, positive valorisation of that 'normality, as if the preceding situation did not generate very serious ethical problems. Instead of thinking that the past world will reappear, once we finalize the struggle with the pandemic, and open the gates of our 'Oran', I propose we look back at the juncture of two notions, essential in the

existential thought of Camus. In my presentation, I would like to propose a rethinking of absurdity and revolt as a framework for our contemporary situation. 2020 has confronted us with a situation that seems similar to the description of absurdity by Camus. It is a situation in which we are faced with the inadequacy of human reason to face and defeat the existential conditions imposed upon us. It is also a situation that has considerable political consequences, which go in line with Camus's warnings against the possibility for the human mind to be 'possessed by the absurd'. This combination of natural and political, again in line with the development of Camusian thought, can be seen through the perspective of rebellion. But, given the huge misunderstanding of this Camusian concept, it seems credible to assume that instead of thinking what kind of ethical novelty we should seek, we should perhaps consider this: how a considerate understanding of rebellion can help us face the challenges of the contemporary world, and endure, without the appeal of 'going back to normal'.

'Jaspers and Chichilnisky on Liminality and extreme events'

Stefano Papa (University of Vienna)

Jaspers' notion of limit situation or boundary condition (*Grenzsituation*) or liminality (not Jaspers' term), first articulated in *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen* (1919, chapter III, § 2) has been applied, both by Jaspers himself and recent commentators, to two aspects of politics: the application of liminality (guilt) to the condition of Germans living under the National Socialist regime opens the possibility, via the rational ideal of integrity, of a politics of non-domination and its moral correlate (*The Question of German Guilt*, 1947). The second limit situation is that in which mankind faces the possibility of self-destruction: "Either all mankind will physically perish or there will be a change in the moral-political condition of man" (*The Atom Bomb and the Future of Man* 1961, original 1958). The problem with these remarks is that the conditions of applicability of a category of self-being, boundary condition, to the realm of historical and political events, is not spelled out. Some hints are given in what Jaspers says about the tragic, in *Von der Wahrheit* (1948): redemption in the tragic condition and redemption from the tragic condition are distinguished. Both are considered as genuine possibilities of self-being, while the aestheticization of the tragic condition leads to a paralysis of existence. These hints could help clarify the concept of authenticity in the sphere of political accountability. For Jaspers, though, the process of planetarization (Kant: "the common possession of the surface of the earth") exhibits dysfunctional aspects: the type of consciousness correlating with man's "interfering with natural causation" is not a liminal "epochal consciousness", but one foreshadowing a provincialization of the human perspective (the obsolescence of humanism): the question ought to be posed, whether this latter consequence coincides with a fate of de-humanization, or rather the achievement of a "global consciousness" has to be thought as a shift towards an "ecological civilization". The mathematician and economist Graciela Chichilnisky has recently revised the economic theory of the value of a statistical life (see Chanel and Chichilnisky, *Valuing life: experimental evidence using sensitivity to rare events* 2011, and Chichilnisky, *The Topology of Fear* 2009). She argues that the insensitivity to extreme events postulated in expected utility theory implies counterintuitive results falsified by experiments. A weaker version of continuity in the valuing of risks is proposed. For both Jaspers and Chichilnisky, liminality (facing extreme events, like the probability of nuclear war, or ecological crises and, as one may add, a pandemic) is important for the type of existential assessment involved. In this contribution possible intersections of the two approaches are focused upon.

'Political-Philosophical Existentialism and Crisis: A Schmittian look on the Covid-19 pandemic'

Laila Yousef Sandoval (Endicott International University & Saint Louis University)

The COVID-19 crisis can be classified as a planetary event, due to the globalized characteristics it presents. The perception of a crisis of this type goes beyond the particular experiences of the nation-

state, therefore any analysis should take a look at this specific trait of this international challenge. The jurist and philosopher Carl Schmitt can offer the tools to study the meaning of a globalized and connected world, not only in economic and market terms, but above all in terms of the experience and understanding of the human existence. The conception of a single planet earth, in which there are no longer virgin or unknown spaces, or, in this context, spaces without a pandemic, generates a particular understanding of human life and crises. Schmitt, who died in 1985, could not witness this pandemic, but he dedicated his life to study the transition from the modern to the contemporary world, that is, the change from a world where substantive differences between state entities existed to another where distances - not only physical, but cultural and existential ones - were diluted. He considered that, far from being positive, this homogenization would crush the specific differences of each place, and above all, that this would be aggravated by the technological advances and the use that the masses would make of them. The objective of this presentation is to explain how this explanation could help to understand the global reaction in terms of fears, hopes and uncertainties that every single individual is going through in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

‘Crises of Possibilities: A Heideggerian Perspective on the Problem of Crisis’
Daniil Koloskov (Charles University & UC Louvain)

In my presentation, I would like to explore H. Dreyfus’s reading of Heidegger in order to tackle the existential aspect of crisis. I will first demonstrate the ecstatic character of Heidegger’s notion of understanding, which is “equiprimordially” constituted by significance and for-the-sake-of-which. What is disclosed by understanding are things in their “ownmost” possibilities, which simultaneously discloses Dasein as ability-to-be (*Seinkönnen*), a being that is capable of realizing possibilities that things offer to it. H. Dreyfus places a great emphasis on Heidegger’s notions of understanding and possibilities as not interchangeable with cognition and objects, viewing them as non-cognitive phenomena grounded in average public practices. Heidegger’s interest, claims Dreyfus, lies in what Dreyfus calls “existential” possibilities, i.e. possibilities that are actually open in a situation, thus, making possible our orientation in it by constituting a “room-for-manoeuvre,” (*Spielraum*) i.e. set of meaningful and appropriate involvements available for Dasein. My idea consists of two aspects. First, I would like to approach the phenomenon of crisis as a decrease in existential possibilities. Second, I will also argue that such an approach problematizes Dreyfus’s own position, which offers a too rigid account of existential possibilities. Instead of saying that the average public practices one-sidedly provide us existential possibilities, as Dreyfus seems to do, we should rather say that Dasein as ability-to-be finds existential possibilities *through* the practices. These two points combined make it possible to view the phenomenon of crisis as a certain event that disrupts the interconnections between different possibilities (the “room-for-manoeuvre”) that are constitutive of practices, which downgrades our ability-to-be or our being-possible (*Möglichsein*).

SESSION 3: KIERKEGAARD AND BEYOND

‘The Person on the Street: Kierkegaard and the Dialectics of Populism’
René Rosfort (Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre, University of Copenhagen)

The question of populism plays a pivotal role in contemporary societies. It pops up in political debates, in sociological and economic discussions, in debates concerning education, social media, digitalization, in philosophical debates, and even with respect to the current covid-19 pandemic. It is not always clear what the concept populism precisely stands for, but it is normally used in a pejorative manner, speaking to the emotions rather than to reason, and aimed at establishing the sovereignty of the people by destroying or at least disrupting the elitist or—depending on the perspective—traditional Enlightenment ideas of politics, social structure, education, and the good life. In this paper, I propose

to use Kierkegaard's existential critique of the establishment—intellectual, social, and religious—in the name of person on the street to bring out the dialectic character of populism that is often overlooked or ignored in present-day use of the concept. Although the concept of populism is vague and confusing, it is predominantly seen as a bad thing. I will argue that Kierkegaard can help us to see that notwithstanding the very real and dangerous threat that populism poses to liberal societies, populism is not, from a liberal perspective, unequivocally a bad thing. Populism is endemic to liberalism, and we should not—and cannot—simply try to suppress or eradicate populism from our liberal agendas. Instead, we have to see how populism, dialectically, reveals serious problems at the heart of contemporary liberalism. A Kierkegaardian approach to populism will allow me to discuss what I consider to be one of the most fundamental of these problems, namely the persistent inequality that permeates liberal democracies undermining the admittedly vague Enlightenment ideal of freedom common to all versions of liberalism.

‘The Struggle for Recognition—Kierkegaard and Beyond’

Iben Damgaard (Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre, University of Copenhagen)

The video of a policeman, who keeps his knee on the neck of George Floyd for 8 minutes while brutally ignoring his begging for air to breathe, has exposed that all lives still do not matter equally in our societies despite the official embracement of the declaration of universal human rights based in the “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family.” As a young thinker in the left-Hegelian tradition, Karl Marx concluded his critical theses on Feuerbach with the famous dictum: “Philosophers have hitherto only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it.” Yet, can philosophy help us change the world – and how so? I will explore how philosophical thinking on the problem of recognition may help us to think and act better in the present global struggle for recognition of the equal worth of all individuals. Through Axel Honneth's analysis of recognition and invisibility at stake in the experiences of the Black American first person narrator in Ralph Ellison's novel *The Invisible Man*, I approach Kierkegaard's phenomenological exploration of the problem of recognition in the ways we see or ignore each other, which has been brought out in Arne Grøn's interpretation of *Works of Love* as an ethics of vision. I argue (1) that we find important resources in Kierkegaard's hermeneutics of suspicion, which exposes how hidden behind the modern celebration of political equality, humiliating disrespect persists in new more subtle ways in which one person may let the other person understand that she does not fully count as a fellow human being, but (2) we need to go beyond Kierkegaard in thinking about how to employ these resources in the struggle for socio-political change.

‘Freedom and morality in times of crisis’

Mélissa Fox-Muratton (ESC Clermont/PHIER, University Clermont Auvergne)

The past months have seen the emergence of various novel phenomena: from the simultaneous confinement of over half of the world's population as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic to the social uprisings throughout the world against discrimination and racism. Is there a link between these events? Have the restrictions imposed upon our freedom and our experience of isolation enabled us to become more conscious of the inherent injustices and inequalities of our societies? Have they brought about a new moral conscience? While this may be a stretch of the imagination, I propose to think through these questions through the lens of the existentialist ethics of Simone de Beauvoir, who immediately after the Second World War proposed an “ethics of ambiguity” stemming from times of crisis, pointing to the uncertainty and ambiguity of the human condition as the foundation for a new ethics based on the struggle for the freedom of all individuals. While the present context differs in many ways from the troubles of her days, her work may serve to find the “force to live and reasons to act” in the consciousness of our human condition and the relationships of dependency that link us to others. Epidemics, like wars and situations of extreme emergency, are events that radically upset our collective and individual existences, confronting us with our vulnerability and powerlessness, and our inevitable moral failings. In times of crisis, lives and freedom are lost, we cannot save everyone, we

cannot always respect all of our moral values and principles. We may have to give up certain of our freedoms, and even some of our most fundamental moral principles (such as that everyone has a right to medical care, if the resources available do not allow for all patients to receive the treatment they need despite our best efforts). We may encounter insoluble moral dilemmas, and thus a heightened awareness of our condition: we thought that it was up to us to make decisions about our lives, we are suddenly obliged to acknowledge that external events can annihilate all of our projects. In these circumstances, it may be easy to fall into despair. Beauvoir reminds us, however, that it is the ambiguity of our existence, its vulnerability, that should be the point of departure for arriving at a new way of thinking about ethics, which places human freedom at the centre of our concerns. When external circumstances (be they economic, political or societal) weigh us down, it is easy to seek refuge in despair or to attempt to flee our responsibility—to say that we can do nothing, or that it is not our fault. More difficult, however, is to assume responsibility and perhaps even guilt, despite our apparent powerlessness—and this is precisely the path that Beauvoir sketches out.

SESSION 4: SOCIETY, HUMANITY AND OTHERNESS

‘Rethinking Humanities’

Shai Frogel (Kibbutzim College of Education & Tel Aviv University)

“Merely fact-minded sciences make merely fact-minded people” (Edmund Husserl, *The crisis of the European sciences and the transcendental philosophy*). The time of Corona raises many thoughts regarding the meaning of human existence that are usually not in the centre of the academic discourse. This discourse is formed in the image of modern natural science, which focuses on objective knowledge and technological progress and based on empirical methods. As the result of this trend, the humanities were pushed into the corner or forced to adopt the model of natural sciences. The time of Corona exposes the incapability of this discourse to cope with existential questions and necessitates a re-examination of the academic discourse and the place of the humanities in it. Husserl argues that the success of positivist science causes us to confuse method with reality. Reality is reduced to objective facts which are defined by their possibility to be investigated by empirical methods. This circularity turns the world, including human existence, into no more than a heap of facts. Husserl’s way to cope with this bias is by directing us to our lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*), which is far richer than the world of objective knowledge. Furthermore, this perspective shows that objective knowledge, like other experiences of human being, is constituted by human consciousness which gives it its meaning. Gadamer continues this line of thought by claiming that human sciences should be related to the humanistic tradition rather than to methodological sciences. He bases this claim on the opposition between method, which deals with regularities of events, and interpretation, which deals with the meaning of events. Gadamer’s hermeneutics, as a humanistic approach, emphasizes human beings’ freedom to shape the meaning of their existence. It is a hermeneutic project rather than methodological one because its goal is not objective description of world but meaningful life in the world. The paper uses Husserl’s and Gadamer’s criticism of the scientific discourse for re-examination of contemporary academic discourse. It claims that the first step in the rehabilitation of the humanities is the recognition that the humanities are not a weaker but a different science (*Wissenschaft*); it investigates objects of meaning rather than objective facts.

‘Tillich on Ethics and the Relational Metaphysics of Human Being’

Sarah Thomas (KU Leuven)

This paper will address two questions: the possibility of a firm ground for moral obligation, and the question of whether this would require a minimal metaphysics of the human being. It will draw primarily on the work of Paul Tillich in his American period. A Christian existentialist, Tillich was invested deeply in how philosophy and theology could respond to the human condition of estrangement, particularly in the post-war context. His work features searching inquiries into the nature of being, the nature of human being who participates in being and nonbeing, and related implications for morality. On the subject of morality, Tillich discusses moral obligation and natural law diffusely, but this has received little scholarly attention. While he was critical of certain strands of natural law thinking that subsume moral experience under ossifying systems of universal rules, he recognized that the basic spirit of natural law is admirable, indeed necessary to face the moral and existential challenges of the time. In Tillich's thought, the natural law is the "moral imperative." It is "the innermost law of man himself, rooted in the divine ground which is man's own ground." The moral imperative is the unconditional demand, given by nature, to become who one essentially is. By explicating Tillich's metaphysics and theory of the moral imperative, and by drawing out their engagement with personalist and existentialist sources, this paper will argue that Tillich's understanding of the source, structure, experience, and fulfilment of moral obligation is rooted in a distinctly relational metaphysics, with significant implications for human existence in the realm of the personal.

'The White Oppressor'

Talhah Mustafa (University of Nebraska - Lincoln)

The experiences of white men have molded American society into what it is through the subordination of black Americans. That subordination has evolved into other forms by invalidating and aggravating the experiences of the black community. White supremacist ideologies continue to influence today's society and are now more dangerous than ever. This paper will explore how the evolution of white supremacy invalidates and aggravates all black experiences. The importance of this paper is to bring awareness to the white supremacy that is active today. The existence of white supremacy influencing today's society is controversial, but by discussing the issue, we attempt expose it. The system that was created by white supremacists remains and continues to influence the political sphere, and by extension, the social sphere. Positing this system also postulates the historical background that has oppressed and subjected African Americans to the ideologies of white supremacists, thus taking the black experience for granted. These white experiences, that have been anchored in white supremacist ideologies, have been assimilated into societal norms, such that going against these white experiences is like going against human experience itself; these white experiences have become the standards for what is normative (Mills 2015, 10). However, using non-white experiences to influence politics is frowned upon because doing as such would entail its disrespect to the norms currently in place. Those same norms that have been determined by only white experiences and those that have been founded on racial privilege. This paper will explore how those white supremacist ideologies invalidate and aggravate the problems black Americans encounter in the political sphere in the current era. How has the evolution of white supremacy affected all black experiences in today's society? In attempting to draw a distinction between pre and post-American Civil War white supremacy, I argue that the purview of political power can always be expanded as there is no limit in the political sphere; however, the influences in the political sphere don't always translate into the social sphere. I hope to bring attention to how these white experiences classify the black experience as trifling, and how it further perpetuates the problems black Americans face because of the white ideologies being imposed onto them, thus essentially taking their autonomy away.

'Disclosure and Narrative: What Beauvoir Can Teach Us about Racism'

William Pamerleau (University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg)

In Simone de Beauvoir's *Ethics of Ambiguity*, she advances a notion of the self as a product of development and subject to social influences. It is also based on the notion of "disclosing being," making the world present by our presence in it. These aspects of her thought, I argue, are consistent with theories of narrative identity. Combining these views bolsters the important elements of Beauvoir's existentialist theory while making it more applicable to social issues. In telling our story, so we choose which events to relate – or disclose – to create a meaningful account of who we are and what our lives mean. Narration is a form of disclosure: distinguishing between what is significant and meaningful and what is not. When we disclose our life as narrators, however, we find that much of our story has already been told by others. We inherit various social scripts that structure both what and how we narrate our lives. We also share or impose these scripts on other people, effecting how they disclose their own lives. What we are currently witnessing in the Black Lives Matter movement can be understood from this perspective. Since narratives are selective, nonblack people need to listen to the stories of black persons in order to have a better understanding of the meaningful elements that make up their lives. The narratives that serves as social scripts involving color and ethnicity also shape the way persons exposed to those narratives see themselves and others. Beauvoir's goal was to achieve a society where persons were maximally free to disclose the meaning of their lives. By applying her views through the lens of narrative identity, we may be able to make progress towards this goal on issues like those surrounding color and oppression.