

## ❖ Existenz ❖

## Mundane Existence and Existenz

If by "world" I mean the sum of all that cognitive orientation can reveal to me as cogently knowable for everyone, the question arises whether the being of the world is all there is. Does cognitive thinking stop with world orientation? What we refer to in mythical terms as the soul and God, and in philosophical language as Existenz and transcendence, is not of this world. Neither one is knowable, in the sense of things in the world. Yet both might have another kind of being. They need not be nothing, even though they are not known. They could be objects of thought, if not of cognition.

*What is there, as against all mundane being?* In the answer to this question lies the basic decision of philosophy.

We answer: there is the being which in the phenomenality of existence *is not* but *can be, ought to be*, and therefore decides in time whether it is in eternity.

This being is myself as *Existenz*. I am Existenz if I do not become an object for myself. In Existenz I know, without being able to see it, that what I call my "self" is independent. The possibility of Existenz is what I live by; it is only in its realization that I am myself. Attempts to comprehend it make it vanish, for it is not a psychological subject. I feel more deeply rooted in its possibility than in my self-objectifying grasp of my nature and my character. Existenz appears to itself as existence, in the polarity of subjectivity and objectivity; but it is not the appearance of an object given anywhere, or uncoverable as underlying any reflection. It is phenomenal only for itself and for other Existenz.

It is thus not my existence that is Existenz; but, *being human*, I am possible Existenz *in existence*. I exist or I do not exist, but my Existenz, as a possibility, takes a step toward being or away from being, toward nothingness, in every choice or decision I make. My existence differs from other existence in scope; my world can be broad or narrow. But Existenz differs from other Existenz in essence, because of its freedom. As existence I live and die; my Existenz is un-

aware of death but soars or declines in relation to its being. Existence exists empirically. Existenz as freedom only. Existence is wholly temporal, while Existenz, in time, is more than time. My existence is finite, since it is not all existence, and yet, for me, it is concluded within itself. Existenz is not everything and not for itself alone either, for its being depends on its relation to other Existenz and to transcendence—the wholly Other that makes it aware of being not by itself alone—but while existence may be termed infinite as relatively rounded endlessness, the infinity of Existenz is unrounded, an open possibility. Action on the ground of possible Existenz disconcerts me in existence; as existence, concerned with enduring in time, I cannot but turn against the doubtful path of unconditionality that may be costly, even ruinous, in existence. My concern with existence tends to make existential actions conditional upon the preservation of my existence; but to possible Existenz, the unqualified enjoyment of existence is already apostasy; to Existenz, the condition of its reality in existence is that it comprehends itself as unconditional. If I merely want to exist, without qualifications, I am bound to despair when I see that the reality of my existence lies in total foundering.

Existence is fulfilled in *mundane being*; to possible Existenz, the world is the field of its phenomenality.

The *known* world is the alien world. I am *detached* from it. What my intellect can know and what I can experience empirically repulses me as such, and I am irrelevant to it. Subject to overpowering causality in the realm of reality and to logical compulsion in the realm of validity, I am not sheltered in either. I hear no kindred language, and the more determined I am to comprehend the world, the more homeless will it make me feel; as the Other, as nothing but the world, it holds no comfort. Unfeeling, neither merciful nor unmerciful, subject to laws or foundering in coincidence, it is unaware of itself. I cannot grasp it, for it faces me impersonally, explicable in particulars but never intelligible as a whole.

And yet *there is another way in which I know the world*. It is akin to me then; I am at home in it and even sheltered in it. Its laws are the laws of my own reason. I find peace as I adjust to it, as I make my tools and expand my cognition of the world. It will speak to me now; it breathes a life that I share. I give myself up to it, and when I am in it I am with myself. It is familiar in small, present things, and thrilling in its grandeur; it will make me unwary in proximity or tend to sweep me along to its far reaches. Its ways are not the ways I ex-



pect, but though it may startle me with undreamed of fulfillments and incomprehensible failures, I shall trust it even as I perish.

This is no longer the world I know about in purely cognitive orientation. But my contentment in dealing with it is ambiguous. I may *crave* the world as the font of my joy of living, may be drawn to it and deceived about it by my blind will to live. I can indeed not exist without this craving, but as an absolute impulse it becomes self-destructive; it is against this impulse that my possible Existenz warns me to detach myself from the world lest I become its prey. Or, *in the world* that is so close to me, so much my kin, I may set out to *transcend* the world. Whether seeing it, thinking about it, acting and loving, producing and developing in it—in all that, then, I deal with something else at the same time, with a phenomenon of the transcendence that speaks to me. This is not a world I know but one that seems to have lost its continuity. It will change according to times and persons, and depending on my inner attitudes; it does not say the same things to all men, and not the same things at all times. I must be ready for it if I want to hear it. If I withhold myself, the very thing I might transcend to will withdraw. For it is only for freedom and by freedom, and there is nothing cogent about it at all.

Possible Existenz thus *sets itself off* from the world in order to find the right way into the world. It cuts loose from the world so that its grasp of the world will give it more than the world can be. The world attracts Existenz as the medium of its realization, and repels it as its possible decay to mere existence. There is a tension between the world and Existenz. They cannot become one, and they cannot separate either.

In philosophizing on the ground of possible Existenz we presuppose this tension. The world, as *what can be known*, and Existenz, as *what must be elucidated*, are dialectically distinguished and then reconsidered as one.

Mundane being, the being we know, is *general* because it is generally valid for everyone. It is the common property of all rational creatures who can agree on its being the same thing they mean. Its validity applies, in the endlessness of real things, to the definable particular.

Existenz is *never general*, and thus not a case that might be subsumed as particular under a universal. Objectified as a phenomenon, however, Existenz is also the individuality of the historic particular. We still comprehend this under general categories, limited only by

the endlessness of individual factuality, which makes the individual inexhaustible and thus ineffable. But individuality as such is not Existenz. All that it is, to begin with, is the visible profusion of mundane existence—a profusion whose existential originality can be examined by the questioner's self-being, but not by any knowledge.

The union of Existenz and the world is the incalculable process of which no one who is a part of it can be sure.

## Possible Existenz Unsatisfied in Existence

### 1. *Doubts of the Being of Existenz*

Once we divorce Existenz from existence, from the world, and from a general character, there seems to be nothing left. Unless Existenz becomes an object, it seems a vain hope to think of it; such thinking cannot last or produce results, so the attempted conception of Existenz seems bound to destroy itself. We can doubt the being of Existenz in every respect and let common sense tell us to stick to objectivity as both real and true. Was the attempt the outgrowth of a chimera?

There is no way to remove our doubts about Existenz. It is neither knowable as existence nor extant as validity. We can deny Existenz as we can deny the content of any philosophical thought—as opposed to particular objective cognition, whose object is demonstrable. I can never say of myself what I am, as if I were demonstrably extant. Whatever can be said of me by way of objectification applies to my empirical individuality, and as this can be the phenomenon of my Existenz, it is not subject to any definitive psychological analysis either—a limit of my self-knowledge which indirectly points to something else, without ever being able to compel that something to become apparent. Hence the elucidation of Existenz is a deliverance but not a fulfillment, as knowledge would be; it widens my scope, but it does not create substance by demonstrating any being that I might objectively comprehend.

Since Existenz is thus inaccessible to one who asks about it in terms of the purely objective intellect, it remains subject to lasting doubt. Yet though no proof can force me to admit its being, my thinking is still not an end: it gets beyond the bounds of objective knowability in a *leap* that exceeds the capacity of rational insight. Philosophizing begins and ends at a point to which that leap takes me. Existenz is the *origin* of existential philosophizing, not its goal. Nor is its origin the



same as its beginning, beyond which I would go on asking for an earlier beginning; it is not my license either, which would drive me to despair, and it is not a will resulting from the endlessness of questionable motivations. The origin is free being. This is what I transcend to as *philosophizing, not knowing, brings me to myself*. The helplessness to which philosophizing reduces me when I doubt its origin is an expression of the helplessness of my self-being, and the reality of philosophizing is the incipient upsurge of that self-being. The premise of philosophizing, therefore, is to *take bold* of Existenz—which begins as no more than a dark striving for sense and support, turns into doubt and despair as reminders of its derivation from the realm of possibility, and then appears as the incomprehensible certainty that is elucidated in philosophizing.

## 2. *Being Unsatisfied as an Expression of Possible Existenz*

If I reduce all things to mundane existence, either in theory or in practice, I feel unsatisfied. This feeling is a negative origin; in separating Existenz from mundane existence it makes me sense the truth of that separation. As there is no knowledge for which the world is conclusive, no "right" order of existence that could possibly be definitive, and no absolute final goal that all might see as one, I cannot help getting more unsatisfied the clearer I am in my mind about what I know, and the more honest I am about the sense of what I am doing.

No reasons will sufficiently explain this feeling. It expresses the being of possible Existenz, which understands itself, not something else, when it declares itself unsatisfied. What I feel then is not the impotence of knowledge. It is not the emptiness at the end of all my achievements in a world in which I face the brink of nothingness. Instead, I feel a discontent that eggs me on.

An inexplicable discontent is a step out of mere existence, the step into the *solitude of possibility* where all mundane existence disappears. This solitude is not the resignation of the scientist who buries his hopes for a cognition of intrinsic being. It is not the irritation of the man of action who has come to doubt the point of all action. Nor is it the grief of a man in flight from himself and loath to be alone. Instead, after all these disillusionments, it is my dissatisfaction with existence at large, *my need to have my own origin*. To be unsatisfied is a condition inadequate to existence, and when this condition has opposed me to the world, it is my freedom that conquers all disen-

chantment and returns me to the world, to my fellow man with whom I ascertain the origin. I do not, however, comprehend all this in thoughtful reflection—which is indeed what fails me—but in the reality of my actions and in total foundering.

This possible conquest alone lends substance and significance to the otherwise irremovable relativity of theoretical *knowledge* and practical *action*.

I may well derive a peculiar and profound satisfaction from a theoretical knowledge of things in general, from surveying world images, from contemplating forms and existence, and from expanding all of this farther and farther, under ideas. But it is my dissatisfaction that makes me feel that this whole world, for all its universality and validity, is not all of being. My attitude in it is not one of curiosity about every particular, shared with a fellow scientist who might be interchangeable according to his function; it is an attitude of original curiosity about being itself, shared with a friend. What grips me is a communion in asking and answering questions, and a communication which within objective validity goes indirectly beyond it.

When I face objective tasks in *practical* life, when I deal with them and ask about their meaning, no meaning that I can grasp in the world will satisfy me. My sense of possible Existenz will not rest even if my conscious comprehension feeds on the idea of a whole in which I have my place and do my job. The thought of fulfillment in an entirety will come to be merely relative, like a temptation to conceal the boundary situations which break up any entirety. Though each idea of the whole is also a step beyond the fission into sheer coincidence, I am never able to survey the whole; eventually it will be back at the mercy of the accidents of mundane existence. A place within the whole, a place that would lend importance to the individual as a member of the body of this kind of being, is always questionable. But what remains to me as an individual is what never fits into a whole: the choice of my tasks and my striving for accomplishment are simultaneous manifestations of *another* origin, unless the annihilating thought that all I do might be senseless makes me shut my eyes. While I devote my empirical individuality to my finite tasks, my possible Existenz is more than that empirical individuality, and more than the objective, realistic impersonality of my political, scientific, or economic achievements. Although its essence is realized solely by this participation in the historic process of mundane exis-



tence, Existenz is at war with the lower depths of the encompassing world in which it finds itself. It is against those depths that, failing in the world, it seeks to hold its own in the eternity of intrinsic being.

Not unless it is indeed unsatisfied—both theoretically, with the mere knowledge and contemplation of all things in the world, and practically, with the mere performance of a task in an ideal entirety—can possible Existenz *utter* and understand this dissatisfaction. It is never *motivated* by generally valid reasons; those rather tend to induce contentment and tranquillity in the totality of a mundane existence permeated by the idea and thus spiritualized. The discontent of possible self-being has broken through mundane existence and cast the individual back upon himself, back to the origin that lets him deal with his world and, with his fellow, realize his Existenz.

### 3. *The Breakthrough Ascertained in Existential Elucidation*

If I am unsatisfied and want to clarify this not just by setting myself apart but by positive thoughts on what this is all about, I come to existential elucidation.

As Existenz results from the real act of breaking through mundane existence, existential elucidation is the *thinking ascertainment* of that act. The breakthrough goes from possible Existenz to its realization, without being able to leave the borderline of possibility. To have its reality—although it is not objectively demonstrable—in action itself is the peculiar quality of Existenz. In its philosophical elucidation we pursue each thought that leads to the breakthrough, no matter from what side.

a. The breakthrough occurs at the *limits* of mundane existence. Philosophical thinking leads up to such limits and puts us in mind of the experiences they involve and of the appeal they issue. From the situations in the world, it leads to “boundary situations”; from empirical consciousness, to “absolute consciousness”; from actions qualified by their purposes, to “unconditional actions.”

b. But the breakthrough still does not lead us out of the world. It occurs in the world, and so philosophical thought follows the appearance of Existenz in the world, in “historic consciousness” and in the “tension of subjectivity and objectivity” in its existence.

c. The breakthrough is *original*. Events happen in the world, but in the breakthrough something is settled by me. Existenz is certain that no part of intrinsic being can stay unsettled for it as a phenomenon in temporal existence. For either I allow the course of things to

decide *about* me—vanishing as myself, since there is no real decision when everything just *happens*—or I deal with being originally, as myself, with the feeling that there must be a decision. My thought, aimed at the origin, seeks to elucidate “freedom.”

d. Nothing I know in the world can give me any reasons for my decision; but what I am to decide can be grasped in the medium of that knowledge. Existential elucidation pervades my existence in the world, not in the sense that what matters were now known, but so I can sense possibilities that may give me a grasp on truth—on what is true as I *become* true. “I myself” and “communication” as the premise of self-being are the things we try to cover in the fundamental thoughts of all existential elucidation.