



The Ambiguity of Existential Metaphysics

Ralph McInerny

Volume 12, numéro 1, 1956

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1019939ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019939ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Laval théologique et philosophique, Université Laval

ISSN

0023-9054 (imprimé)

1703-8804 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

McInerny, R. (1956). The Ambiguity of Existential Metaphysics. *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 12(1), 120–124. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019939ar>

The Ambiguity of Existential Metaphysics

With the recognition of the importance of the existentialists has come a tendency to borrow their name. This is especially true of metaphysicians and doubtless it is understandable. When one is concerned with being as being, he may very well feel that his thunder is being stolen by another who claims to be concerned, not with being, but with *existence*. Thus it has come about that nothing is thought to be adequately ontological until it has become existential. Presumably something more than terminological is added to metaphysics when it becomes existential. In what follows we are asking what it is.

A dichotomy that has recently become quite familiar is that of Essentialism/Existentialism. These terms are said to designate distinct types of philosophy, but neither of them signifies with any amount of exactness in writings where this dichotomy is said to be crucial. "Essentialism" or "essentialist thought" are not labels which indicate concern with what is essential in the sense of important; they are in fact downright pejorative. Essentialist thought is said to be concerned with essences to the exclusion of existence. That is, essences are studied in a bloodless fashion, with no concern for the existence they exercise, as if they were mere concepts, thoughts in the mind. The essentialist philosophy, we are told, does not take into account motion, the dynamism of being, causality, etc. (It seems unnecessary to supply references, since these have become familiar and common assertions.) These and a number of other important doctrines are said to be absent from the essentialist approach. The implication would seemingly be that these are existential considerations. Therefore, one must ask what it is about such problems that puts them beyond the reach of the essentialist philosopher. The reason surely cannot be that their essential features cannot be grasped. The explanation usually given is that, if these are considered, their existential character is not recognized by the essentialist thinker. Before inquiring into what could be meant by the existential character of such entities and events, it may be helpful to list the opposing features of essentialism and existentialism.

In the first place, the bifurcation of philosophy into essentialist and existentialist is said to follow from the recognition of the distinction between essence and existence. A philosophy which puts the accent on essence is said to be concerned with fixed traits and structural properties, with what is quiet, inactive and most readily grasped by the mind. Essences are said to be fixed and timeless and essentialism an abstract intellectualism. Essentialism in ethics is said to see value as a property or essence. Finally, essentialism lends itself to

subjectivism and idealism. Existence, on the other hand, is active and tendential ; its categories are modes of being, tendencies ; existential thought deals with causal efficacy and temporal dynamism because over and above the determinate structure of a being, it recognizes its act of existence which separates it from nothing. In ethics, existentialism sees value as a mode of existence. In philosophy generally it is careful to note the characteristics of philosophizing as an act of the philosopher. Finally, existentialism sees thought as tendential, reaching out to things. If they had to be summed up in a word, existentialism might be called concrete or dynamic, essentialism abstract or static.

I think the above is substantially what one can find in a variety of writings emanating from a variety of sources. If the description has been lengthy, it is because what had to be brought out is that the essentialist/existentialist dyad covers a variety of contentions that are by no means reducible to one central distinction. That is, a philosophy might very well be essentialist on one point and existentialist on another. Moreover, it should be evident that the opposition of essentialism and existentialism cannot be meaningfully reduced, as is often attempted, to the distinction of essence and existence. Perhaps this should be spelled out.

In the first place, an epistemological problem seems to lie at the bottom of the dichotomy, but one that can be understood in several ways. By calling essentialism the concern with the abstract and conceptual, one seems merely to be talking about idealism, or the identification of being with thought. On this view, the opposition of essentialism and existentialism is a reiteration of the opposition between idealism and realism. Another prong of the epistemological problem could be that only essence can be grasped by the mind, whereas existence is not conceptualizable, that is, is unintelligible in the sense of suprainelligible. Some thomists hold for this interpretation and it has devastating ramifications. If existence cannot be gotten into thought and if philosophy is something of thought, existence could hardly serve as the basis of distinguishing one philosophy from another save in a purely negative way. When philosophy is had, therefore, it would always be essentialist. A third and related possible interpretation of the epistemological root of the dichotomy is in terms of the difference between the mode of existence things have in the mind as opposed to the mode of existence they enjoy *in rerum natura*. Concentration on the former would be essentialist, on the latter existentialist. But surely even a non-idealist philosophy would admit of essentialist sciences in this sense, notably logic and, though not in the same sense, mathematics as well.

The most tenable interpretation of the opposition between essentialism and existentialism would seem to lie in the realm of ethics. If this is the case, it becomes clearer that the distinction derives not

from essence vs. existence in the scholastic sense of the real distinction, but from the existence with which the existentialists (Kierkegaard explicitly and consciously, contemporary existentialists perhaps only implicitly) are primarily concerned. Their description of existence and the existential has little or nothing to do with the *actus essendi* in the thomistic sense. Rather, it is human existence, the history of one's acts, the moral existence of the individual that the term seems to signify. Concern with this existence is something quite different from a concern with the actuality of a subsisting essence, and existential thought, being turned towards the subjective appropriation of existential truth by the human agent, will fittingly hold in abhorrence any attempt to solve an existential, i.e. ethical, problem by means of abstract thought. This disdain is as old as Aristotle who scoffed at those who would become good by philosophizing. Although Kierkegaard on several occasions spoke of existence in what might be called an ontological fashion — calling this the loose sense of the term — the obvious import of the word in his writings is an ethical one. Indeed, he explicitly points out that he is not concerned with the identity of thought and being, nor with whether thought has an existent as its object, but rather with the existence man has. Such an existential concern, he continues, can be exhibited only in ethical or ethico-religious thought. In the realm of action, the inadequacy of thought and conceptual definitions should be apparent enough, as well as the fact that the subject must be appetitively engaged in the thought which precedes action.

The mention of Kierkegaard brings us to what would seem to be the heart of the matter. When a philosophy is called existential, is the term "existential" adjectival or adverbial, that is, does it refer to the *content* of the philosophy, or to the *mode* of philosophizing? In Kierkegaard's type of existential thought, *what* is being said or thought is never as important as *how* it is said or thought. Here the existential refers to a mode of acting, to the appetitive. Now, appetite and the "engagement" of man, choice, are only accidental to metaphysics and speculative thought generally. One must choose to study metaphysics, but reason's assent to metaphysical truths is explained in terms of the cogency and evidence of the object, not in terms of appetite. Even practical philosophy, although it is existential in the sense of ordered to action, does not engage the subjectivity of the student. One can learn ethics without becoming virtuous. Only action involves appetite and passionate engagement intrinsically. One does not become good merely by taking thought, and it is in the area of the prudential judgment that Thomas Aquinas speaks of knowledge by connaturality, a judgment imbued and intrinsically affected by the affective state of the subject. If the generality which is common to all the sciences, and inescapable even in the practical sciences of behavior, had to be excluded from metaphysics, metaphysics would

have to bear first and directly on the existence and activities which characterize *this* historical individual. Metaphysics would therefore be the same as history of which Aristotle said that it is less philosophical than poetry.

With regard to the content of a philosophy, of speculation, it would seem that anything which enters in must be conceptualized, abstract, intelligible in act, grasped by the mind either as to *what it is* or *what it is not*. As has often been observed, the definition of motion does not move, nor is what contingency is contingent. So too with tendency; the notion of tendency does not tend towards anything, nor does the notion of existence cause anything to exist. When we name these subjects, their names must signify something and something which is grasped by the mind. It seems oddly true that nowadays it is those who describe themselves as existential metaphysicians, who identify essence and the being which things have in the mind, as if essence were a second intention, a merely logical entity. The gravest deficiency in so-called existential metaphysics lies in what is, to say the least, an unhistorical acceptance of essence. The essence of a thing meant *what it is*. In metaphysics, as well as in the philosophy of nature, the essence is of that which either can or must exist; "exist" not merely in the sense of truth, as in logic and mathematics, but in the sense in which Socrates exists. Such essences are unthinkable without reference to the existence which can only be had in the singular. For who can conceive of man as one can of a second intention or of equilateral triangle? Today, essence is sometimes identified with what a name signifies, the *ratio*; sometimes essences are said to be possibles and essentialist thought is described in the same way as theologians describe God's knowledge of simple intelligence. It is the first identification which has led to the assertion that "existence" signifies nothing, and yet this same existence is said to be crucial to metaphysics. The consequent disparagement of science and demonstration and the relegation of metaphysics to a somewhat mystic cult seems inevitable. It was not long ago that it was the enemies of metaphysics who maintained that metaphysical notions are meaningless, which indeed they would be if we had no individual existent, no *hoc aliquid*, to start and abstract from. In fact, every abstraction has a *terminus a quo* which, ultimately, is a material singular, an existent directly known to us in sensation: *this* thing, *this* animal, *this* man. But if we are to achieve science at all, if there is to be actual intelligibility, we must abstract from this term. The ultimate *terminus ad quem* of metaphysics is also an individual, to be known by way of demonstration, whose value depends both upon our knowledge of material individuals and upon the truth achieved nevertheless in abstraction from such individuals. Hence, what is actually being questioned is the value of knowledge itself, of knowledge by abstraction, and of science. No wonder that some existentialists question the demon-

strative value of the *quinque viae*. They would have their truth depend upon the ability to make a man behave as he should by the sole force of speculative truth. Which is another way of saying that speculative science cannot be true unless its conclusions are practical truths in the sense of prudence.

One who has come to an appreciation of the service Kierkegaard did for the philosophical treatment of human existence and of his defence of the complexity and difficulty of choice, cannot help but feel that the existentialism he fathered now has grand-children who might well sport the bar sinister. There may be an intelligible way of speaking of existential metaphysics, but our conclusion is that this remains only a possibility. Moreover, one gets the strong suspicion that those who want an existential metaphysics, like the contemporary existentialists themselves, show a marked proclivity for importing the existential notes of action — the importance of the subjectivity of the agent, appetite, passion and practical as opposed to speculative truth — into speculative thought. It is ironic that this amounts to placing the problem of human existence back in the order of speculative thought from which Kierkegaard has rescued it. One is reminded of the concluding passage of *Fear and Trembling*. "Heraclitus the obscure said, 'One cannot pass twice through the same stream.' Heraclitus the obscure had a disciple who did not stop with that, he went further and added, 'One cannot do it even once.' Poor Heraclitus, to have such a disciple! By this amendment the thesis of Heraclitus was so improved that it became an Eleatic thesis which denies movement, and yet that disciple desired only to be a disciple of Heraclitus . . . and to go further — not back to the position Heraclitus has abandoned."

RALPH McINERNY.
