

SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS AS FACT, EXPERIENCE AND
VALUE; A PHENOMENOLOGICAL REINTERPRETATION

I. THE SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE INTELLECTUAL

1. A PERSONAL SEARCH

I would like to sum up all of my past efforts in philosophy, aesthetics and philosophical anthropology—particularly in aesthetics in the context of philosophical anthropology and general axiology.

One has to have a formula for life, something which may serve as a leading motif for one's intentions, activities and aims. I had been looking for such a formula ever since the beginning of my involvement with philosophy. At first, I had found it in the religious commands of the Decalogue, and then, after I became professionally involved in philosophy, in the thought of Roman Ingarden. This gave me a lot, though I did not find anything that I could be totally satisfied with, something which I could see as final and unquestionable, and, above all, as my own.

I found something like this in Sartre's philosophy. In the early fifties I ordered and had brought to Poland (which was neither easy nor safe) Sartre's book *L'Être et le néant*, which became a great object of theoretical fascination for me. It was there that I read the words of this formula on life and on man: man is what he is not, and he is not what he is. This formula of life was connected with existentialism's claim that existence precedes essence. The essence of the human being is shaped throughout life—it is never "ready." Therefore, man does not know who he is in his essence because it is being endlessly created—it is never there at any given moment. Only when life ends does his essence become something defined, and at the same time, paradoxically, this essence perishes, annihilates itself, because its drive towards a further existence ceases. Man is always present before himself—this is probably assumed by the thesis of self-consciousness. This presence assumes that there is a distance (emptiness, nothingness) between the "I" and what we are. The "I" is present before itself, so nothingness enters the very core of human being. Therefore, Sartre described man as "I'être pour soi."

These reflections on Sartre's paradoxical remarks led me towards my reflections on time. As a motto I chose a sentence from Rilke: "Die Zeit ist mir mein tiefstes weh." Time shows us how much we are not who we are, and how much we are who we are not. The flow of time shows us who we were and are, but never who we will be. The future is a great unknown, and life never has a proper end; it is always simply interrupted. Sartre said that every day, maybe even every hour of his life, man chooses himself. All the time new possibilities arise for him. If he loves, one does not know if he will love tomorrow; if he is an honest man, one does not know what he will be like tomorrow (even whether he could be a murderer).

What about Ingarden's formula? I was especially taken by his remark that man's actions and behaviour come out of his nature—if someone enjoys being malicious to others, then that means that he is like that in his very nature: he is bad. It is never the other way round: he is not bad because he is malicious to others. This is not a formula for life, but rather a certain message, which I picked up in order to complete it. It says that man's actions and behaviour emerge not only from his nature, but also from his intentions. We are again faced here with the problem that we are not who we are, and we are who we are not: we intend to do something which is either better or worse than our nature. This issue needs to be developed. Finally, man behaves in a certain way, because he has been provoked by certain events, because the world is as it is—it arouses in him unknown forces and makes him act in ways he would never have intended.

I kept finding many formulas of life and many cues on how to live. *Ens per se* belonged to the former—man is a Being thanks to himself; he creates himself and takes the responsibility for his existence. He creates himself—here we can accept Sartre's opinions: existence precedes essence, man chooses himself, the past events do not determine future actions. I proposed a set of themes which should lead us through life: liberty, purity, a sensitivity of feeling and leading a life at a level suitable to one.

I differentiated a few ways of structuring one's life: *vinceris*—faith in victory, the hope that one will succeed, even if everything seems to anticipate a defeat; *suum cuique*—the rule of justice, of giving to each what is due him and this in terms of both material and spiritual goods. To works of art too consideration is due (here one can cite Ingarden, who said that one should do justice to a work of art—noticing and accepting the values present in it). We must recognize the crucial values of persons, respecting them and accepting them even when they are not tantamount to our own beliefs. Finally, there is *amor fati*—loving one's own, bad fate. In my book *Estetyka rzeczywistości*

(*The Aesthetics of Reality*) I noted the negative sense included in this formula. After years of different experiences, however, I see its positive meaning, which is important for human life. The fate of each person is bad: it often ends with illness, being left by one's dearest and, last but not least, death. It is important to accept this bad fate, to start "loving" it, to not go over and over one's misery in one's ponderings but to come to terms with it.

I also came to some conclusions which contradicted those already mentioned. After Ingarden and Sartre, my third source of inspiration was Mikel Dufrenne. His book *Phénoménologie de l'expérience esthétique* was as fascinating for me as the work by Sartre was. Yet the formula I would like to discuss just now was not taken from that book, but heard in a lecture during the Aesthetics Conference organized in 1981 at Tarnów by the Faculty of Aesthetics (of the Institute of Philosophy) of the Jagiellonian University. The cry of Parisian students of 1968 was echoed: "Let us be realists and demand that which is impossible."

I took up this important formula in my book *De educatione liber*. What given current conditions appears to be impossible can, thanks to the power of human imagination and human inclination to remove difficulties, emerge into the light on a new day. A world such as has never been predicted can take shape. This really works in our current reality, and also in our personal reality, of course. This rule of life led me to accept the notion that possibilities constitute an important element of the meaning of human existence. We are who we are not, because the horizon of possibilities is still open for us.

I was fascinated by one more thing in Dufrenne. He proposed the thesis that the work of art is something similar to man—it is a *quasi-sujet*. Therefore, it opens for us a broad field for exploration, because it can be studied endlessly, just like a human being, due to its inexhaustible depth. This ambiguity of the work of art is analogous to the ambiguity of a person, and that takes us back once again to Sartre's thesis. A work of art is what it is not and is not what it is.

We are not who we are because we do not identify with our acts and behaviour, we do not identify with our thoughts. We often condemn our actions and do not consider them to be ours. Do we regret them? Perhaps we do, but what is important here is the feeling that it happened as it were outside of us and we do not know why. Here we can see the Sartrean emptiness—the nothingness separating us from ourselves. There are also many thoughts which we have despite disagreeing with them. I called these "projects" of the personality: the project of expansion, of revenge, of

expression. These projects make us want to conquer as much of the world as possible, take revenge for being hurt (and not necessarily on the offenders) and to express our experiences and possibly impose them on others. The desire to take revenge, for example, hatches in our consciousness, but in the end a man will not take revenge—he rejects that thought and feels that it is alien to him. Also many “good” thoughts have a similar character—we dismiss them, maybe because we do not want to follow them, maybe because we cannot.

I came to the conclusion that our actions, behaviour and maybe our thoughts and ideas come out of several sources: We act as we do because we want to—it is a conscious choice. We act as we do because it is in our nature and/or personality; this is a realization of the project of expression. We act as we do because the world forces us to act in just that way—and yet we react to events in an unpredictable way. In all these instances there is a gap, a nothingness between the self and “not self”—which of them is true then? Is it the one which wants to achieve something, wants to express itself in action and also reacts to frequently accidental events? Or is it the one which restrains itself from an intended act which it sees as evil, to save one’s dignity and to not reveal one’s real feelings, experiences and intentions, and the one which “calls back” the spontaneous reaction to an event because it is realized that this reaction is not in one’s nature but comes out of that which one is not?

Is there a way out of these dilemmas? Is there a bridge between who we are and who we are not? Once, trapped by these doubts, I saw a light from the end of the tunnel, which could lead me out of this maze. I accepted a dictum of one of the ancient Greek wise men: *age, quod agis*. If one undertakes something, one has to complete it, otherwise, if one drops everything and starts all over again, one will get lost in time. Acting is the leading thread in our lives, that which can consolidate human existence and prevent it from going to pieces in time—from its division into discrete moments, none of which can reflect our personality.

And yet my experiences and reflections upon the essence of human existence and the world led me to question this rule also, because we can continue a line of action not only towards good but also towards evil. In accepting the principle of *age quod agis* we should consider the consequences of fulfilling tasks leading to the good, to a celebration of humanity and of being human, with such actions being compatible with one’s nature, it is to be hoped, and the consequences of tasks go against the good, against being humane, and may follow from one’s corrupted nature.

Therefore, one cannot judge these issues without referring to the world of values, without accepting that some values are higher and some lower, some positive, some negative.

In the past the exercise of this judgement was called conscience. Yet, although this intuition seems to be right, it is too undefined, too ambiguous. Therefore, we can either accept the essentially ambiguous nature of our existence or agree with the fact that our existence is based on giving a chance to our external reality (just as the reality gives us a chance at self-fulfilment), and so take up the burden of existence by admitting—with all due respect—that our “becoming” means taking advantage of the opportunities given to us.

Opportunities? Each of us has different ones, and each achievement and each withdrawal opens up or “closes down” opportunities to evolve and to achieve something. That is why any declaration that there is a path of development for everyone—let us say by following the example of distinguished people, people with the highest ethos—is unjustified. Even if one imitates the most sublime model, that does not solve anything. One has to find one’s own unique way.

There is, however, one common opportunity which we do not have to imitate because it concerns all of us—the opportunity of liberating ourselves from the “pain of existence,” being torn inside, our pains, our worries, and our schism into who we are and who we are not. Every person since his/her birth aims at one thing and has one opportunity which makes us all equal—everyone knows what that opportunity is.

2. FACT—A RECONSTRUCTION

The above fragment is a summary of a paper I gave at the Polish aesthetics seminar “*Estetyka sensu largo*” held at the Faculty of Aesthetics of the Jagiellonian University in Krakow in 1997. Including it in this essay is an attempt to introduce the notion of “facts issuing from self-consciousness” a theme independent of what we are looking into now in this essay. That essay is self-standing material.¹

This kind of reconstruction—based on “first hand” information, assuming that one accepts one’s involvement in philosophy from the “inside,” i.e. taking into consideration one’s sensate and inner experiences, reduces the possibility of mistakes in understanding facts, allowing one to avoid ambiguity and feelings of ignorance. One should not treat such materials as general knowledge theoretically objective, nor as the draft of a system. It is simply raw material which has to be described and analyzed so that it can be recognized as a fact.