

*Polish Journal of Philosophy* 5, 2011, 139 – 148.  
Contemporary European Philosophy, After Half-a-Century  
Joseph Agassi,  
Tel-Aviv University and York University, Toronto\*

\*I. M. Bochenski, *Contemporary European Philosophy: Philosophies of matter, the Idea, Life, Essence, Existence and Being*. Translated from the German by D. Nicholl and K. Aschenbrenner. University of California Press, 1956. Pp. xi + 326.

This essay is a response to an invitation to contribute to a volume in memory of Joseph Bochenski. I am flattered. Our paths have crossed only once, long ago, during a conference. We briefly discussed then some of his works. Regrettably my familiarity is limited to his popular writings—on logic and on contemporary philosophy. I find them admirable, just because they are successful vulgarizations. The Enlightenment Movement rightly deemed as lasting intellectual assets only items accessible to all. This holds particularly for philosophy, whose rightful place is the market place, where Socrates of old used to pester passers-by. Though he insisted on his right to do so, preferring death to quitting it, reactionary philosophers showed disdain for common people. Recently their disdain won a professional consensus of sorts. The stage of popular philosophy is now almost void. Much of the void is filled by scrap. This makes Bochenski's contribution very significant.

I was eager to discuss with Bochenski his distinctive book on *Contemporary European Philosophy*. I was struck by his openness. He said its success had surprised him, as it was initially but a lecture course for American soldiers stationed in Europe after the War. He admitted he was not sufficiently prepared for the task. He made extensive revisions to it, sincerely embracing criticism and suggestions.

The value of a successful vulgarization is lasting: it enters the cultural heritage, even though it and what it vulgarizes are not immune to obsolescence, of course; valuable items remain parts of the cultural heritage even after they are superseded. Bochenski's *Contemporary European Philosophy* is an example: over half-a-century later it still challenges. This is a critical view of a significant part of this book followed by a brief discussion of the basis for its success.

In half-a-century the scenery changes, but schools do not change fast, only their famous leaders do. The knowledgeable may notice this by a glance in the four-page long Index [of names; it is flawed]; others should skip this paragraph that is but a comment on that Index. Most its items

are single entries. Of the most frequently named some serve as background: St. Thomas, Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche. I counted 18 of Bochenski's near-contemporaries: Alexander, Bergson, Blondel, Bradley, Brentano, Carnap, Collingwood, Nicolai Hartmann, Heidegger, Husserl, James, Jaspers, Marcel, Meinong, Reichenbach, Rickert, Russell, and Whitehead. Some of them are forgotten; today Frege, Peirce, Wittgenstein, and Popper would be better noted; Buber, Bunge, Gadamer, Quine and Rorty would be mentioned too. (Polanyi too, whose work is eclipsed by Kuhn's famous wayward version of it.)

The first challenge for a writer of a survey, awfully hard in philosophy, concerns the choice of a framework. A survey of all frameworks should be modified repeatedly in the light of each of them. Relativists (Collingwood, Evans-Pritchard, Polanyi, and Kuhn) who insist that the choice of a framework is arbitrary, have no other option. Not scientists. Newtonian and Einsteinian mechanics share a framework that imposes the latter on all scientists. Since absolutism allows for relative truth (as Bunge shows) but relativism is the denial of the possibility of absolute truth (or even meaning to the very concept). Allowing for significant error leaves relativism with no merit.

A Dominican, Bochenski naturally tended towards Thomism. As he was not dogmatic, his choice of a framework is happy, it being accommodating: it is absolutist about truth and dualist about the mind-body problem in metaphysics (in a manner less Thomist than Cartesian, a fact overlooked here). This is no endorsement on my part: though an absolutist, I am no Cartesian: as logic has pushed out of the arena the very concept of substance or essence; Cartesian dualism can hardly survive this amputation. Fortunately this was not noticed by Bochenski, or else he could not write this survey.

It is hardly useful to discuss here the contributions of Russell and the "Anglo-American" philosophers (this includes the Viennese!). Bochenski was perceptive in his dismissal of positivism, sensationalism and pragmatism; very interested in modern logic he nevertheless allotted it a secondary place, declaring erroneously that it is indifferent to metaphysics. (It should be indifferent to metaphysics, of course, as it should not adjudicate disputable matters.) Consequently, logic comes as an after-thought, as an appendix to the second edition. Bochenski's view as expressed there is now generally received, though only tacitly. This, however, has to do more with the politics of the profession than with historical facts.

Besides the "Anglo-Americans", we meet here diverse neo-Kantians and neo-Hegelians (including Marxists), and historicists of all sorts. By now these are marginal and out-of date; what of their output that invite attention is absorbed in the later part of the book that still challenges, particularly the part on Heidegger, who plays a central role, and wins high praise, but such that, taken seriously, undermines his philosophy better than any other contemporary presentation of it.

Heidegger declared the essence of Man fear [dread, anxiety, Angst] plus boredom. This is odd. The view of the essence of Man as (conceptual) thought, at least sounds understandable: of all creatures only humans use abstract language. Thus, in defense of materialism La Mettrie claimed that in principle computers and monkeys can learn to speak. Right or wrong, this renders classical metaphysics understandable. The Marxist view of the essence of Man as work is similarly understandable if work is considered broadly. By comparison, modern alternatives look arbitrary. It is hard to see how to compare rationally the following options as to what comprises the essence of Man: fear and boredom (Heidegger); fear and nausea (Sartre); pure fear (Kierkegaard?); dust and ashes (Camus?); wickedness (traditional religion?); love (traditional religion?); knowledge of good and evil (Genesis, 2:17); sweet tooth.

Heidegger challenges. Truth is the let-be-of-the-what-is, he says; and, beauty is the let-be-of-the-what-is; hence, he concludes, truth is beauty. This is odd. The inference is a famous fallacy ("a is c" and "b is c", therefore, "a is b"); Heidegger knew that; his message is not literal; it baffles. Was it meant to baffle?

Heidegger's fame is now lesser than it was when Bochenski presented it. The cause of this decline is his wretched personality and the Nazi ingredient of his philosophy that is nothing if not profoundly and overbearingly Romantic and militaristic. When Bochenski's book appeared Heidegger was the rage; much of the book's value is due to its effort to explain Heidegger in relatively simple words. Whatever may be said of it, it displays admirable courage. Perhaps it started the trend away from taking Heidegger seriously.

Bochenski's first mention of Heidegger is apropos of logical positivism, where he agrees that Heidegger's famous "the Noting nothings" is meaningless—not because of any logical analysis like that of Carnap but because it baffles. It may then be viewed as meaningful when it is properly explained. Bochenski takes up the challenge and tries to offer such an explanation. To the extent that the explanation is not understood, it should be left and the initial text may be ignored or

explained again, in accord with the rule that one should not try hard to interpret an interpretation. After over fifty years it is clear: as the task is not likely to be repeated soon, what can be gained from Bochenski with ease is canonic Heidegger—more-or-less.

Bochenski says he finds Heidegger exciting although he is exceptionally "hard to understand" (p. 161): he is an "extremely original thinker" (*loc. cit.*). His scholarship is great but it hardly counts, since "he interprets ... in a very arbitrary fashion" (*loc. cit.*). Some of Bochenski's accounts are hard to comprehend too. Authoritative commentators declare his translation of Heidegger's terminology only approximate (p. 162, note). This should do for us here.

So the essential Heidegger is more-or-less this: *philosophy is universal phenomenology proceeding from the hermeneutic of human existence* (p. 163). What this means can be unpacked, as Bochenski offers the meanings of these terms: to understand humans some deep idea is needed, idea about existence. What this existence is we learn soon (p. 189): "What mythical language calls 'soul,' is called 'existence' in philosophical terminology." Existentialism is thus idealism in disguise.

Heidegger agrees: the world is made not of things but of tools (p. 164). Not, things first exist and then become useful, but the other way around (p. 162). This is idealism pure and simple. Since Bochenski is a confessed realist, he is here simply polite in presenting Heidegger's depth as that of the view of the world as my dream, in the fashion of Fichte's *The Destiny of Man* (1800). Facts, say Fichte and Heidegger, are man-made. Bochenski presents existentialism as the view that to be free is to be self-made (p. 160), again much *à la* Fichte's *The Destiny of Man*. Assuming that we do craft ourselves (out of what?) does it follow that we can unbind our fetters? Fichte proclaims that his philosophy makes all fetters vanish. This is just bragging.

Heidegger perceives: as I create my world, by itself it does not exist, and this is dreadful. He fuses this dread with Freudian dread. (He did not acknowledge this debt; Sartre did.) He translates Freud's angst, objectless-fear, fear-as-such, into his fear-of-nothingness. Dread is fear of nothingness, death is nothingness; hence, dread is fear of death. We have already met this sort of fallacy. The essence of Man is asking, what is the essence of Man? This looks different from the claim that the essence of Man is fear and boredom. No fear. The essence of Man is deep thinking, and deep thinking is about nothing, namely, about death, so the essence of Man is the fear

of death and the boredom associated with it. True: angst leads to depression and the chief symptom of depression is boredom.

Some people are full of energy and enthusiasm. Heidegger dismisses them as despicable pragmatists, as slaves to things (p. 167). Worse: pragmatism is the worst self-deception, as it rests on fear. Heidegger calls the honest with oneself authentic, and the self-deceiver he calls inauthentic. Self-deception is a big crime. (Sartre says it is the only crime. Likewise Konrad Lorenz demands in the name of honesty that we admit our cruelty and jealousy and so allow for them.) The authentic are in agreement with us; the others we must despise and ignore. (This renders Heidegger's philosophy an instance of what Popper calls reinforced dogmatism.)

"Death alone is the end of human existence" (p. 167). Fine. Without death there is no life. Fine. The "day-to-day being" is "untruth" (p. 168); it is nothing (so that ordinary people deserve contempt). To be extra-ordinary we "have to commit ourselves spontaneously" to surpass ourselves, to follow our conscience such as it is; we will thus overcome all sense of guilt (pp. 168-9). Bochenski could not possibly condone this dismissal of all guilt. He did not cite Buber on guilt and guilt-feelings because he was ignorant of Buber, as he frankly admitted to me.

After the presentation of the profound idea that a sense of guilt torments (pp. 168-9) and the profound conclusion from it that we should ditch all sense of guilt, the core of Heidegger's view becomes transparent: it is the recommendation of resoluteness.

Authentic resoluteness is the opposite of egocentricity, as it is the readiness to die, to make the supreme sacrifice. [This is Heidegger's celebrated philosophy of [evolutionary] being in time (pp. 169-70): selfish Man can evolve and develop the readiness for self-sacrifice and heroism. Query: can one be resolute even when self-sacrifice is not required? No. As the famous Fascist slogan goes, *Vivere pericoloso!* Live dangerously! Now it all ties in: the fear of death prevents people from taking risk and then they suffer boredom. The cure is resolution, impulsive commitment to a cause; fighting; literally fighting—with weapons and all. When bullets whistle, death and boredom are vanquished. Bochenski admits that Heidegger is hard to interpret, particularly as he rejected all his interpreters. "Freedom is the ground of the ground"; this, says Bochenski, is "the last word of Heidegger's philosophy" (p. 172). Freedom to commit oneself to the lifestyle that Nazism recommends, then.

My presentation of Heidegger is much too long. Fortunately I can quicken my pace, as the part already reported is the heaviest. Sartre, Marcel and Jaspers follow. I will discuss only Sartre.

Bochenski appreciates Sartre more than Heidegger, as he is less romantic, more rational (p. 173). This is an unexpected condemnation of Heidegger. Sartre is a determinist, yet he permits human freedom (p. 175)—because we are a universe apart. Hence (!), Man has no fixed essence; hence (!), human essence is freedom; hence (!), it is the ability to change (p. 177). "Freedom reveals itself in dread"; so we seek reassurance by attempts at domination *à la* Hegel). So we are all in permanent conflict (pp. 178-9): freedom is frustrated. Desperately, then, Man tries to be God. This is absurd, as Man is essentially imperfect. Existentialism is nihilist, concludes Bochenski. This applies to Heidegger too, but only tacitly.

Sartre endorses Heidegger's theory of authenticity with a vengeance: the only real crime is self-deception. Why is only honesty of real value? Is a common decent simpleton inferior to a frankly brutal Nazi? No answer. Hoodlum philosophy did encourage some Nazis to be proudly brutal. Why are they better than the simpletons they gleefully murdered? No answer.

As Bochenski wrote his survey, memory of the shock of the discovery of the Holocaust was still fresh. His discussion here begins with a presentation of contemporary philosophy as undergoing a crisis. Matters were first viewed that way by Husserl: his final, moving study (1936) is of that crisis, presenting it as political. Husserl and Bochenski share the minority view of philosophy as always relevant to ordinary life, and they readily accepted political responsibility for their actions. Why then did Bochenski dodge this point here? Because he preferred to hint, to put matters in understatement.

Indeed, the force of his presentation is in its gentleness. He imposed harsh questions, however gently and tacitly, and he left them. He did so with ease, oblivious to recent events and oblivious to embarrassing philosophical questions, old (what is essence?) and new (what is being-in-the-world?). Existentialism came and went; but essences still are with us. What are they?

Preceding the chapter on existentialism is one about essence, devoted to Husserl and Scheler, mostly Husserl. How much of his idiosyncratic essentialism became generally received?

Husserl is not as unusual as he seems, since he is one of the better known students of Brentano. He attempted "to overcome empiricism, idealism and even conceptualism" (p. 152), not

to mention nominalism and phenomenism (p. 153). This had a "great liberating force", as he allowed "to recognize other aspects of the spirit", including emotions (p. 152). He wanted to assume nothing, yet to that end he did assume the theory of essences, and that essences so described do exist.

This is puzzling: essentialism is not necessary for Husserl's rejection of all the traditional philosophical doctrines and for his recognition of emotions. The gain from essentialism, says Bochenski, is in its placing Man in the center (p. 153). Why is this gain? What if Man is a marginal thing in God's Universe? And does the assumption that man is the center of the universe (Aristotle?) burden us with essences?

Husserl put aside epistemology. So did Frege before him. Both suggested that question of knowledge be postponed, yet only Husserl ignored natural science and developed his phenomenology instead. What was gained thereby? Husserl's new method is of analyzing the essence of the appearance. What did he say this was?

The most basic idea in philosophy is the traditional Greek division of the universe to appearances and reality, with only the real as fixed and simple and worthy of our respect and attention. Unlike appearances, essences belong to reality, not to appearance. Husserl tried to find what is real in the apparent. Does that make sense? How? This question divides philosophers to those who admire Husserl and those who ignore him, and it causes the most embarrassing segregation among philosophers. It is so severe that the very few that have crossed the line ignore their own past. It is no accident that the relevant part of Russell's monumental *A History of Western Philosophy* of about the same time makes no mention of Husserl.

What can the essence of appearance be? It is what makes an appearance whatever it happens to be. An appearance and a fantasy of a thing have the same essence. Since (by definition) appearances vary and essences persist, the question baffles. Husserl's predecessor, Brentano, opened the road to a new attitude to appearance by declaring that as meaning includes reference, speech cannot avoid some realism. As Husserl spoke of the sense of the appearances, he did not benefit from Brentano's insight. It was exploited by (the older) Wittgenstein and his followers; they made it a basic tenet of their philosophy. Regrettably, Bochenski says, though Husserl began as a realist, he ended up an idealist (p. 132). Not so; Husserl had hoped that his method will yield realism and he simply failed. A failed realist is still a realist.

Bochenski praises Husserl for two items (pp. 143-5). First is his critique of nominalism. This is embarrassing. Tradition has two theories of meaning as reference, essentialism and nominalism. Traditionally, then, the dichotomy holds between them: criticizing one sufficed as defense of the other. Only the conjunction of both critiques transcends the dichotomy. Even that is no longer needed, as the traditional theory of meaning as reference was transcended already by Boole's definition of the empty set; this is a point that both Frege and Meinong made amply clearly. One need not endorse the view of the meaning of names as long as Frege's refutation is accepted of the reference theory of meaning (by the contrast of contingent sentences like "the evening star is the same as the morning star" with necessary sentences like "the morning star is the same as the morning star"). The allegation that Husserl refuted nominalism is thus false and redundant. So is the allegation that Wittgenstein refuted essentialism. (Those ascribing to them these achievements display an inability to ascribe to them any new idea.) Admittedly, nominalism and essentialism are still popular, but this is another story, partly due to the erroneous identification of today's Platonism with its pre-Fregean version.

The second praise of Husserl is for his theory of meaning. He endorsed the inclusion in meaning of both sense and reference (of Frege, who is overlooked here) and added mental images, propositional attitudes (assent, doubt, etc.), content, and more (p. 134). Further additions can be made to the cargo that goes with meaning (Wittgenstein, Austin etc.). But to what end?

Pure grammar includes but meaning-categories and the relations of the whole and its parts (p. 135). The idea of meaning-categories has been severely criticized; it is now advocated only by essentialist Saul Kripke, who demands that possible worlds be created by deeming a word a possible substitute for another if and only if the two belong to the same meaning-category. The logic of the relations between wholes and parts was developed by the Polish school of logic (here hardly alluded to) and others, including Prior and Bunge. It matters little how much it signifies and how much it owes to Husserl: standard presentations of philosophy and of his phenomenology ignore it.

Husserl is primarily the inventor of the phenomenological method. It is the recommendation that all that appears to the mind (fiction included) should be admitted and elucidated (explicated, to use Carnap's locution). Husserl had hoped that when all possible worlds are clearly described, the true one will stand out. Kripke too admits meaning-categories as

intuitions, saying they are reflected in ordinary parlance; the difference of fact from fiction he also sees as intuitively given; and he says there is no way but to trust this intuition. (His version of essentialism is not traditional, as it takes depictions of essences to be neither definitions nor definite, and hence not binding. Like Husserl, Kripke sees no way out of the commonsense view that clear intuitions are usually right.) He is taken to be a follower of Wittgenstein rather than a synthesizer of Kant, Husserl and Wittgenstein.\* This is so due to the politics of the profession and to the fleeting fact that these days Wittgenstein's fans are supposed to possess a smattering of logic, whereas Husserl's fans can do without it.

Husserl's failure to secure a hold of reality, says Bochenski, led to the development of existentialism as a theory of being (of the real). Whitehead's tenet too is then a theory of being, and Thomism as its culmination. Whitehead's tenet is called process philosophy: he took modern physics seriously, concluding that fields of force replace matter, and as forces are mere potentialities, the actual is a mere potential, if one may use Aristotle's idiom to restate Whitehead's philosophy. Bochenski ends his discussion of it by reference to his conception of God that is the process variant of Spinozism, and he moves on to (neo-) Thomism, which he presents as a theory of being (p. 239), and which he endorses, so that the story as he presents it is of a line of progress from Husserl to Bochenski.

This is hardly surprising: Hegel was an Aristotelian, and all whom he influenced suffered the same fate. The ideas here presented as central to (neo-) Thomism (pp. 239-40) can be viewed as developments from Aristotle *via* Hegel, Marx, (Bergson,) Husserl and Heidegger. Only what Bochenski says here of the soul and of its duties is under dispute. At the end of the book Bochenski admits that essentialism suffers severe difficulties and he praises it nonetheless as he values metaphysics and as he sees no better expression of this love than Thomism. Sharing his love of metaphysics I do not know why he puts it in a Procrustean bed except for his religious affiliation that I will not discuss.

What then is the secret charm of the book? How should it be appraised? Clearly, the author's bias in favor of metaphysics is one of its assets, and this one is marred by the identification of metaphysics with essentialism of an unspecified sort. Since it is shared by Aristotelians, Hegelians, and their later-day heirs, and since this renders them not understandable to all, it is a

marvel that Bochenski has succeeded to survey them in a manner at least half-understandable to all.

How should one handle a text that one finds not sufficiently understandable? In answer to this question Wittgenstein has suggested the technique of clarifying a text until it is purged of all metaphysics. This is now *passé*. Derrida has insisted that his texts are not understood as much effort is required in order to acquire sufficient background knowledge to comprehend them. Yet opponents claim to have made such efforts and to have failed to comprehend him nevertheless. Bochenski offers a remarkable middle way that sounds almost understandable, yet it shows how much arbitrariness this philosophy still exhibits, and how much of the critique of essentialism it simply ignores.

Reading Bochenski's book helps to get some general idea of what is going on and to see the importance of the critique of the classical theory of meaning as reference. The weakest point in Bochenski's book is his claim that modern logic is irrelevant to metaphysics. He may be right, of course. But Russell insisted on the claim that modern logic is very relevant to metaphysics as it grants relations the same kind of reality as properties. And, right or wrong, Russell is not to disregard. Insofar as Bochenski sees the controversy between nominalism and essentialism as central to philosophy, he admits that much of philosophy is stuck. This must be remedied in the light of Frege's critique of the classical theory of meaning as reference. There still is no adequate theory of meaning, perhaps, and Bochenski's mention of the fact that so many logicians are Platonists is certainly to the point. But there is no return to the old theory of meaning. This is the moral from Bochenski's book, despite his own deep convictions, and so the book should be updated.

Joseph Agassi,

Tel-Aviv University and York University, Toronto

\*For a detailed discussion of Kripke's work see my "Naming and Necessity: A Second Look", *Iyyun*, 44, 1995, 243-72.