

## Enzo Paci: From Existentialism to the Things Themselves<sup>1</sup> Carlo Sini

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with Michael Lewis

Paci's philosophical path has, notoriously, been divided into three main stages: existentialism, relationism [*relazionismo*],<sup>2</sup> and finally, the rebirth of Husserl's phenomenology in the wake of existentialism and the relationship it entered into with Marxism.

From a young age, Paci was one of the protagonists in the dissemination of existentialism in Italy. Already in the conclusions of his dissertation (*Il significato del 'Parmenide' nella filosofia di Platone [The Significance of Parmenides for Plato's Philosophy]*), examined in Milan in November 1934 by Antonio Banfi and Luigi Castiglioni, Paci called for a meditation on the problem of the nothing and non-being [*non essere*], on the crisis which, he tells us, invades European philosophy, and on the need to traverse this crisis of civilisation and life with eyes wide open, and indeed, to let ourselves explore this crisis in order to transform it. In 1940, with *Pensiero, esistenza e valore [Thought, Existence, and Value]* and in 1943 with *L'esistenzialismo [Existentialism]*, Paci manned the barricades of the philosophy of existence with Abbagnano and Pareyson. In 1950, his existentialist philosophy culminated in the book, *Il nulla e il problema dell'uomo [The Nothing and the Problem of Man]*, one of his masterpieces, which found itself widely disseminated with the creation of the journal, *aut aut [either...or]*, the name of which already clearly harks back to Kierkegaard.

The reference to Kierkegaard is the first point that I believe needs to be made clear in order to understand Paci's speculative path in its entirety, even beyond its historical reference to the school of the existentialists. In fact, Paci made his own the motto of Kierkegaard, to 'accentuate existence', and, in essence, he

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<sup>2</sup> Paci himself defines this notion as follows: 'By the philosophy of relation I mean that philosophy which does not consider as creative centre of reality an Identity, a first unsurpassable cause, but which, on the contrary, thinks of reality as a relation among many elements, of which none is identical to itself and of which none is such as to have the others depend in an absolute fashion on itself' (Paci 1972a, 221). – Ed.

remained faithful to it to the end.<sup>3</sup> Accentuating existence means keeping existence always in mind, and not blocking it from view or demeaning its importance; but the motto also means not ignoring or leaving unspoken the paradox. Existence names the insurmountable fact according to which each of us exists in the unrepeatable singularity of their material and moral situation, which makes every external view upon the world and upon existence *de facto* impossible: the existentialist philosopher, and every human being along with them, is in this way put in question by the very question that he raises: existence, an irresolvable question.

From this imbroglio, Paci wrought the central theme of the relational [*relazionistico*] development within his thought, which centred on the immense problem of time. The Kantian schematism, the organicist conception of temporal duration in Alfred North Whitehead, but also Proust, Joyce and the Eliot of *The Waste Land* formed the site of an extraordinary reflection whose essential point concerned the relation between time and consumption: existence is inscribed in the structure of temporal irreversibility ('Il significato dell'irreversibile', in *Tempo e relazione*, 1954). Here the existentialist paradox is given new life in the midst of a most elevated meditation. Paci observed that every reflection on time is itself temporal: but this signifies, as Whitehead had insisted, that time is marked by the experience of rhythm. Rhythm testifies to the fact that in every experience both recognition and memory are at play ('There it is again' [*Eccolo di nuovo*]), as Whitehead put it<sup>4</sup>), but also an irrecoverable loss, because what returns is at the same time the sign of a forgetting: that which returns does not return, since it signals the fact that it is 'new', hitherto unseen and at the same time insuppressible.

This complex route touches on a fundamental point, which characterises the whole itinerary of Paci's thought, and that is the theme of possibility in opposition to necessity. Hence the firm opposition to all of those philosophies or conceptions of the world which posit being, ontology, metaphysics, absolute revelation, geometrical order, and mathematical law as the foundation of truth. This tenacious opposition to the reduction of truth to logical syntax or metaphysical deduction attains its highest development in Husserl's work; but from this moment forth, the vision of truth which is in fact Paci's own, is outlined: not the truth of life and the truth of the world, expressed in mathematical formulae or logical judgments, but the *life of truth*. In fact, the truth is not a thing [*cosa*] or the content of a thought, but the very event of existence, whose character is its irresolubility, understood as an always repeated opening to the possibility of being [*essere*]. Therefore, truth does not resemble a formal fact but is rather akin to the inquiry into the sense of

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. 'Existence can never be more sharply accentuated than here. The fraud of speculation in wanting to recollect itself out of existence is made impossible', Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Trans. Alastair Hannay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 176 – Ed.

<sup>4</sup> 'We are comparing objects in events whenever we can say, "There it is again". Objects are the elements in nature which can "be again"', Alfred North Whitehead, *The Concept of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge Philosophy Press, 2015), p. 92 – Ed.

human existence, an inquiry which can never be definitive in its formulation or in its answer, because that would be tantamount to the negation of life and of the inescapable [*intrascendibile*] mortal condition.

This set of problems spanned the great project of the recommencement of the Husserlian phenomenology after Heidegger's existentialism. In a note written in August 1958, Paci writes:

Phenomenology is a vision of truth but the truth is infinite [...]. Situated between two infinities, existentialism tends to break the relational synthesis between nature and truth, between existence and idea, between sensibility and essence: relationism recovers the synthesis, reconstructing from the ground up the experience of phenomenology and renewing the Kantian schematism. Born from phenomenology, 'positive' existentialism resumes phenomenology on the basis of rational intentionality. It was necessary for me to rediscover the rational intentionality of the corporeal and historical reality of man. For this reason, as early as the 1950's, I was obliged to say that the transcendental is man (*The Nothing and the Problem of Man*). Phenomenology is also a way of feeling, of living, and of discovering, in life, the truth.

This philosophical project became fully transparent in a note that Paci wrote in September 1958 in his fascinating *Phenomenological Diary* (later published in 1961), one of the most favoured and bewitching of Paci's books:

My aim is to influence philosophy and Italian culture with phenomenology. Mine is a relationistic phenomenology which attempts to take into account the entire history of phenomenological thought and to overcome existentialism. Its principal elements are *time*, as understood by Husserl since 1904-5, and *relation* as it appears in the *Fifth Meditation* and in the *Crisis*. Some of the unpublished works of Husserl on time are a response to [Martin Heidegger's] *Being and Time*. At this point, we can no longer do without this response. Positive existentialism is transformed into phenomenology as relationism.

Thus was the struggle for Husserlian phenomenology begun, with the journal, *aut aut* as its primary means, and the publishing house, Il Saggiatore offering ample opportunities for translations, reprints, together with individual and collective essays; it is also necessary to recall the newly opened publishing house, Lampugnani Nigri, launched with the express intention of supporting Paci and his students' cultural actions, which were first developed at the University of Pavia and then at the University of Milan — students who were increasingly numerous, hard-working and motivated. The advent of phenomenology announced itself progressively throughout Italy and remained in force for approximately fifteen

years: it came to involve not only philosophy but the entire culture, from its literature and aesthetics to architecture, music, and finally the natural and social sciences, cybernetics and economics. During these years of great innovation and audacity, the journal, *aut aut* addressed in depth the question of how to make philosophy engage with the entire horizon of knowledge and with the living world of society and politics. Naturally, the journal received a great deal of reaction, positive and negative, a taking of positions and polemics. The final outcome is still awaiting an adequate and above all complex historiographical investigation, which is certainly not easy to bring about due to the complexity and very large quantity of material to be studied and interpreted, starting with the profound connections that Paci and the Milan School in those years entertained with Ricoeur, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, not to mention many others, relationships that evolved thanks to their travelling along parallel and common pathways, a journey marked by encounters, collaborations, discussions, falling-outs, and so on and so forth. This is a panorama which extends beyond the Italian borders to include European and even North American culture as a whole.

The main text in which Paci summarises his interpretation of Husserl and the rebirth of phenomenology is the book, *Funzione delle scienze e significato dell'uomo* (*The Function of the Sciences and the Meaning of Man*), which was published in 1963, two years after Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*: both works highlight the great cultural change which associated phenomenology with Marxism. Paci's book enjoyed a uniquely wide distribution for a stringent work of philosophy. In this book, Paci recommenced his discourse in confrontation with the sciences, making Husserl's criticism of 'naturalism' his own.

At the beginning of the second chapter ('The Occlusion of the Life-World and the Meaning of the Transcendental'), Paci writes:

According to Husserl, Galileo substitutes the categorial dimension of mathematics for the truly experienced and experienceable world, i.e., for our real daily world, the *Lebenswelt*. Idealised nature becomes superimposed on prescientific, intuitive nature [...]. Every category arises from the environment, from the surrounding world in which each of us lives, from the precategory *Umwelt*. Every category has a goal which is part of the life-world and refers to it. However, only the world where the scientist lives as a man, our living world, is questionable within the infinite and open horizon of what has yet to be investigated.<sup>5</sup>

The invitation to thematise the lifeworld and the precategory operations as the 'transcendental' foundation of all scientific and worldly categories is placed in a balanced antithesis with both the Kantian and idealist transcendental subject (a 'mythological' subject, says Husserl) and Heideggerian ontology, which establishes

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<sup>5</sup> Enzo Paci, *The Function of the Sciences and the Meaning of Man*. Trans. Paul Piccone & James E. Hansen. Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1972, p. 19. – Ed.

entities, being, and their difference as the result of mere intellectualistic abstractions, ignorant of the operations on the basis of which they were constituted. This critique of superstitious ‘objectivity’, in particular of the logicist mindset, finds its emblematic expression in the Preface that Paci wrote for the Italian translation of [Husserl’s] *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, published by Laterza (1966):

A logic of the ideal forms of signification, constructed as something in its own right, is *just as* philosophical as the positive sciences in general, as logic renounces the authenticity of the ground through which it could achieve self-understanding and self-justification; therefore it has no norm with which to help the positive sciences overcome their positivity. The *non-philosophical* element of this non-positivity lies precisely in this: that the sciences, because they fail to comprehend their own operations, as a result of an operative intentionality remaining unthematized for them, are not capable of clarifying the true sense of being in their field and of the concepts with which it is grasped. Consequently, they are not able clearly to determine the sense of the essence of which they speak or which horizons of sense it presupposes, horizons of which the sciences do not speak; and yet these horizons nonetheless participate in the determination of sense. In connection with the dogmatic ingenuousness of a formal logic that is supposedly self-sufficient and which rests upon a self-valorised evidence, stands the ingenuousness of a theory of knowledge tacked on from the outside, ‘superadded’ [*sopraggiunta*]. [...] The true theory of knowledge is the clarification of the ‘authentic’ sense of logical concepts and of logic itself.

The relevance [*attualità*] of such a taking of positions seems clear to me and it should continue to be debated and evaluated. We shall briefly resume the rest of the treatise as it relates to the ‘positivity’ of the sciences, criticised by Paci.

The question can be traced back to the beginning of the Vienna lecture given by Husserl in May 1935, which is, as we know (along with the Prague lecture shortly afterwards), a principal source of inspiration behind *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, Husserl’s final work, which was left unfinished with the author’s death. In the posthumous edition edited by Walter Biemel, the Vienna lecture appears in the appendices. Paci often recalled in his lessons that exemplary beginning, which in fact threw the ‘objectivistic’ and ‘naturalistic’ attitude of the modern sciences into crisis. Husserl started from the perennial question of the dualism between the sciences of nature and the sciences of the spirit:<sup>6</sup> a dualism in reality already burdened with prejudices, because there is not and cannot be a comparison between two spheres of real entities such as

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<sup>6</sup> The English translation of the *Crisis* gives ‘natural science’ and ‘humanistic science’ (cf. *Crisis*, p. 271). We occasionally revert to this latter, although it remains a little further from the Italian and the German, particularly in those passages where Paci (or Sini) very closely paraphrases Husserl himself. – Ed.

those of nature and spirit. Husserl writes: ‘only nature can be treated by itself as a closed world; only natural science can abstract with unbroken consistency from everything spiritual and investigate nature purely as nature’ (‘The Vienna Lecture’ in *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*. Trans. David Carr. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970, p. 271). If a body falls from a window, natural science can calculate the speed etc., without interesting itself in its ‘social’ nature, which is to say, abstracting from the fact that it is, for example, a ‘human’ body and that there are motives behind the action which could be investigated at the level of ‘social’, individual, and ‘criminal’ responsibility, and suchlike. The human-scientist cannot operate the same ‘abstraction’ of the natural world thanks to which an autonomous world of the spirit, parallel to the natural one, would unfold before the scientist’s eyes. The ‘animal’ spirituality, the spirituality of ‘human and animal souls’, says Husserl, is based on pre-categorical and material corporeity. The human-scientist cannot investigate his object otherwise than in a descriptive (and not normative) manner, which is to say, taking into account the physical nature in which the subjects being studied live and have lived. For example, an historian of Greek antiquity cannot fail to take into account Greek [physical] geography, architecture [‘the corporeity of its buildings’ – Husserl], economics, and so on.

However, all of this leads to a paradox on which Paci used to insist. On the one hand, the human scientist, for example the historian of Greek culture, has among the phenomena which they study, physical nature:

but this nature, wrote Husserl, is not nature in the sense of natural science but rather that which counted as nature for the ancient Greeks, that which opened up before their gaze, natural reality in the dimension of the lifeworld. More precisely: the historical surrounding world of the Greeks is not the objective world in our sense but rather their ‘world-representation’ [*“rappresentazione del mondo”*], i.e., their own subjective validity, and, within it, all the actualities which are valid for them, including, for example, gods, demons, etc.

Now it is evident that the notion of ‘surrounding world’ that is lived in a ‘historical’ mode (the surrounding world as it was lived in ancient Greece and so on) can only be an object of consideration for the sciences of the spirit.

Our surrounding world, wrote Husserl, is an historical formation [in fact Husserl writes ‘a spiritual structure’ – Ed.] in us and in our historical life. Thus there is no reason for the one who makes spirit *qua* spirit his subject matter to demand anything other than a purely spiritual explanation for it. And so generally: to look upon the nature of the surrounding world as something alien to the spirit, and consequently to want to bolster humanistic

science with natural science, rendering it supposedly exact, is absurd [cf. *Crisis*, p. 272].

But now comes the most delicate and decisive point. In all of this, distinguishing and arguing over the constitutive difference that separates the sciences of nature and the sciences of spirit, the first ‘nomothetic’ and the second ‘idiographic’,

has completely forgotten that the natural sciences (like all science generally) are constituted from a series of spiritual accomplishments: namely, those of natural scientists working together; as such they belong, after all, like all spiritual occurrences, to the region of what is to be explained by humanistic disciplines. Now is it not absurd and circular to wish to explain the historical event of ‘natural science’ in a natural-scientific way, to explain it by bringing in natural science and its natural laws, which, as spiritual accomplishments, are themselves a part of the problem? [cf. *Crisis*, pp. 272–3]

Based on these and other passages in the *Crisis*, Paci repeatedly exonerated Husserlian phenomenology of repeated accusations (also stemming from Heidegger) of limited or even no understanding of the original historicity of the phenomenon which it took as the object of thematic description, no understanding of the historicity of the ‘things themselves’. Hence Paci’s approach, which fell in between the science of Husserl’s lifeworld and the New Science of Vico, one of the authors Paci studied in his youth (cf. *Ingens Sylva [The Great Forest]* from 1949). This phenomenology ‘reborn’ is, in its own way, for Paci, a ‘New Science’, conscious of its temporal and historical nature, which is linked to concrete historical operations: otherwise put, material and economic. These are the means by which Paci at a certain point posited the unavoidable necessity for a confrontation between phenomenology and Marxism, the theme to which the third part of *The Function of the Sciences and the Meaning of Man* is dedicated, also with reference to Labriola and Gramsci.

However, to return to Paci’s struggle against the superstitions of scientific objectivism, or rather of ‘naturalism’, as Husserl said, it is important to take up once again the Preface already cited, which Paci wrote for the translation of Husserl’s *Formal and Transcendental Logic*. As we have seen, in this text, Paci speaks of the ‘positivity’ of the sciences, intending thereby to refer to the dogmatic positivistic reduction of scientific knowledge to a mere statement of ‘facts’: a ‘positive’ science is a knowledge which has eyes only for ‘facts’ and fails to pose the problem of how these facts emerged within the historicity of human experience or the transcendental conditions of the very act of cognition. As Husserl said in the *Crisis*, a science of facts produces ‘merely fact-minded people’, blind to the intentionality of truth and to the meaning of life, be it scientific or prescientific [cf. *Crisis*, p. 6]. Paci applied the same critical remark to Marxism in its political guise, which inspired a supposed science of history that is reduced to a mechanical

‘factual’ reduction of the relationship between economic structure and cultural or spiritual superstructure. In the struggle against official Marxism, Paci was entirely in agreement with Sartre: both came into conflict with the organic intellectuals of the Italian and French Communist Parties; both, in the encounters organised in Moscow in the USSR on the occasion of the peace celebrations, courageously resisted the positivistic trivialisation of Marxism and its reduction to an instrument of political propaganda.

Paci signalled the culmination of this critical path in 1962 upon the occasion of a lecture he was invited to give by the Philosophical Academy of Prague. It was Karel Kosík (1926–2003) who chose to invite Paci and who was to publish his best known book, *Dialectics of the Concrete*, the following year. The path of Kosík shared a profound affinity with that of Paci: both were critical of Marxist dogmatism and in favour of a ‘humanistic’ rereading of Marx (above all, of the young Marx). Kosík saw the essential difference between human and animal life in praxis and read praxis as a theme already deep in the heart of German idealist philosophy from Fichte to Hegel. This Hegelianism did not please the communist State, from which Kosík suffered considerable persecution, but neither did it afford him any protection from the liberal politics which followed, which refused to pardon him for being a communist, however critical.

When Paci arrived in Prague, the climate was one of immense agitation: the principles of the revolution of the so-called Prague Spring and of communism with a human face were in full swing. Paci spoke on October 24<sup>th</sup>, ‘On the Meaning of Man in Marx and Husserl’. The text of the lecture was published in Volume 73 (1963) of *aut aut*. In his exordium, Paci recalls certain themes characteristic of Marx from the *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts*: the reduction of labour-power to commodities that are bought and sold on the market; the reduction of the worker to abstract labour in which ‘value’ is reduced to the ‘objective’ effects serially produced. These effects, abstracted from the concreteness of working operations [*operazione lavorativa*], are asserted to be the concrete real: commodities take the place of life, oblivious to the fact that commodities are, as Marx had it, ‘crystallisations of human labour, crystallisations of social substance’. Paci observed that,

these crystallisations ignore concrete individuals, and thus fail to make a concrete society possible. The *abstract categories* of economic science, the misuse of such science, means that the value of labour is concealed within the commodity. For this reason, it is very difficult to analyse the commodity.

At the same time, this exchange, this substitution of the fantasy of the commodity for the concreteness of labouring life, suggests to Paci an audacious yet profound reference to phenomenology: even for Husserl it was a question of ‘suspending’ the naïve trust in common sense when confronted with the phenomena of everyday experience; it was a question of recognising, behind phenomenal appearances, the



true reality of experience, behind abstract scientific categories, the ‘things themselves’. The entire project of phenomenology (returning to the things themselves, behind appearances and behind scientific intellectualism which remained ignorant of the true meaning of its own operations despite its undeniable successes) is redirected by Paci so as to accord with Marx’s path. The mere relationship between things, that is, the commodity and abstract labour, is not the reality, as economic science thinks; it is rather the ideological concealment of the real relationship between concrete persons, those persons which economic science constantly presupposes, without ever thematising their operative foundation [*il fondamento operante*]. On the one hand, Paci intends to ward off the danger of ‘naturalism’ in Marx by referring to Husserl, but at the same time, as demonstrated in Prague in particular, he also intends to reconsider Husserl’s path in light of Marx.

For example, Paci writes:

Marx reveals the reality of living labour just as Husserl reveals the reality of the living subject and its operations. The misuse of science fails to grasp that all scientific operations, like the operations of labouring in Marx, are carried out by the concrete subject. [...] Husserl’s task remained interrupted. On the other hand, he has posed the problem of the sciences as a whole, but not the problem of the economy, which is at the centre of Marx’s analysis inasmuch as *Capital* is a critique of the economy. The critique of the economy can lead us to view the task that Husserl had set himself in criticising the sciences and the search for their foundation in a new light. [...] Phenomenology is not a philosophy in the traditional sense. It is a philosophy which should liberate not only the philosopher but all of humanity, and as such it becomes *praxis*.

The work of Paci culminates in the proposal of a new encyclopaedia of knowledge, against the historical backdrop of the Enlightenment project and the great Hegelian Encyclopaedia: the critical return to reason in a renewed phenomenological sense. In the *Ideas for a Phenomenological Encyclopaedia* (1973), Paci, in fact, took his mark from Vico and from Hegel in order to address the theme of the foundation of the sciences: in particular, anthropology, psychology, psychoanalysis, political economy, the natural sciences and cybernetics: a great journey and a grand historical vista.

At the outset of his path (‘Problems with the Unification of Knowledge’), Paci wrote the following:

the tendency towards unification on the part of knowledge has always remained present in the history of culture and human civilisation. However, the problems that it implies acquire a particular relief in the current historical situation, a situation which appears to make the unification of every people on planet Earth inevitable. In each case, both the unification of knowledge

and the unification of groups and peoples, involve parts that tend towards an open totalisation, and the unification enters a crisis, both in the case where the parts are absolutised and each wishes to impose itself on the others as a whole, and in the case where the totalisation is conceived as definitive and without articulation, in such a form, that is, as not to include within itself the constituent parts as specific parts [*non comprendere in sé le parti costitutive come parti specifiche*]. Of course, every part contains a potentiality for development and an implicit totality, just as every man has humanity within himself, but as soon as the part is posited as a totality which has already been realised and concluded, absolutising itself, the movement of unification tends towards self-destruction. The problem of unification is by its very nature a dialectical problem, but it is the dialectic of the current historical situation that enables us to understand, in an absolutely peculiar way, the negative and destructive character of the absolutisation of a partial aspect of knowledge, of a given culture, of a given civilisation. No partial form can alone take on the task of unification while, at the same time, every partial form can contribute to a totalisation of knowledge and of an operation guided by knowledge, inasmuch as in all parts an open totality, indeed an infinite totality, is implicit as a potential. Therefore, every part, according to a paradox which has the same structure wherever it presents itself, has an infinite totality in itself, even though it is part of this infinite totality. [...] The theme of unification has a universal character and can easily descend into generality. However, the problem of how one part can contain a totality in itself is a problem which concerns all disciplines. Aphoristically one could say: a part can have in itself the whole of which it is a part, and it can therefore be a set, inasmuch as it is organised according to an 'essence' [*essenza*] and according to a 'structure'. On the basis of what we have seen so far, we can recognise the very simple fact that the unification of knowledge is always a work in progress.

These thoughts from the late Paci, which have been around for almost fifty years now, are clearly prophetic, both in regard to the unification of politics and the global economy, and in regard to the increasingly problematic nature of this process, destined to ever new conflicts and oriented not at all towards a dialectically unitary solution. At the end of Paci's life, he learned with great anguish of the revelation of the horrors of Stalinism and the political failure of Marxism in Russia. Consequently, Paci wrote in a personal note that the existence of man seems to be inscribed in an insuppressible evil. This is in addition to Paci's active participation in and support of the student movement together with the struggles inside and outside the university, which concluded essentially in defeat. In Paci's last days, he was in many respects isolated and a survivor. But his works, both profound and far-sighted, continue to reveal to us the fecundity of their inspiration, just as they were

vital and indispensable throughout the second half of the twentieth century in Italy and in Europe.

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