

EDITORIAL

We are able to choose how we organise ourselves into social units and how we relate to one-another – this choice is an aspect of our engagement with, and in, the world as social beings. Relationship is manifested in many forms; it may be evidenced in one-to-one, group, therapeutic, familial, friendship, working, national or international encounters. However it shows itself, it needs to be tended and nurtured if the delicate balance between self-determination and cooperation with others is to be maintained.

This dilemma – how to find and keep this balance – is an ontological human dilemma which, like all such dilemmas, is never solved once and for all. If we do not look after our relationships, they can become dull and repetitive and at risk of degradation and exploitation. In this way we gradually lose sight of our freedom. Living in Paris during the Nazi occupation, Simone de Beauvoir said she learnt the most about freedom when it was taken away. This is always an option, but it can be argued that this is an extreme option – and not a desirable one either.

Democracy is a relational event on a national scale, and many people who are lucky enough to live with it find it easy to see it as a fixture. As essential. But it is not. Like any relationship, the more we take it for granted, the less we value it and the more it can degrade.

On a national scale this is an opportunity for populist anarcho-capitalist leaders to claim to have instant easy solutions for complex problems. This is a slippery slope to dictatorship.

World events such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Israel-Palestine conflict, and the continuing and exacerbating climate emergency capture our attention in various ways. The effect of the COVID emergency to prompt global cooperation seems to have diminished, but in the coming year no fewer than forty countries, a record for one year, will hold elections. Some of these will be less free than others; the outcome of several is preordained since opposition candidates have been disqualified, effectively silenced. This is colonisation from within. Should we become complacent, it is salutary to remember that supposedly open democracies are not immune from imposing restrictive measures on assembly and free speech either implicitly or explicitly. In the UK one focus of this has been the confected 'small boats crisis'. It is in the nature of elections to focus on one person, the leader who frequently use conspiracy theories to bolster their power and occasionally this person becomes more important than the election itself.

History teaches us that it never ends well, for anyone. The obvious reason for this is that people are simply human, they fade and die. Things change. We have to keep being reminded of this simple ontological truth.

The desire to believe our 'leaders' is also connected to our desire to idolise and idealise those we think are good, that is, those we agree with and are like us, and to demonise those we think are bad, that is those we not agree with and not are like us. The former tend to get listened to while the latter tend to get silenced. This is the origin of colonisation whether political, economic or cultural. Both alternatives dehumanise equally and fall prey to what R.D. Laing called process, which is when relational events appear to happen by themselves – there is no discernible agent. Such events are thought to be essential. This is bad faith. Praxis, by contrast, is when we take responsibility for our actions within our relationships.

Existentialism asserts that our ontic differences frequently obscure our ontological similarity, and these differences, while important, are insignificant and transient compared to our ontological similarities, our being qualities. And yet it is these ontic differences that get forgotten, overridden or negated in the assertion that some people are less than human in the sense that these either lose their natural rights or never had them in the first place. This leads to a loss of being qualities. While a hierarchy of value that focuses on ontic differences, on essences, must be challenged, the greatest danger is the second. If one person loses their humanity, we all lose it. When the word existential is used in general conversation it is rarely clear what is being referred to. But we are clear, it is that people are under an existential threat when their being, rather than their essence, is threatened.

All the papers in this issue reflect, in their different ways, the questions that arise out of the dilemma of maintaining the delicate balance between self-determination and cooperation with others. We are pleased to have no fewer than five papers that are versions of presentations given at the 2023 SEA conference 'Back to Basics; into the Future'. We are also pleased to have two more papers that are versions of presentations at the 2023 Third World Congress of Existential Therapy in Athens. We are also delighted to feature three papers informed by original research. They are answering new questions. Existentially it is not possible to face the future without simultaneously facing the past. There are also five papers that more explicitly request we reassess the contributions of some known and lesser-known philosophical figures so that we may more authentically approach our futures.

Readers will notice that we have kept the same format for the cover. In considering whether and what to change it to, we confronted the fact that different colours mean different things to different people and also at different times and different places. For example, white is associated with weddings, virginity, purity and cleanliness in European/North American cultures, but it is associated with death, mourning and humility in many Asian cultures. Artists would say that there is no such colour as white, it is simply conceptual, but be that as it may, we have stayed with the blank

sheet/white cover not because it represents either purity or death, but the sense that one has in a violent snowstorm or a dense fog in which one has little sense of up, down, forwards or backwards, nor of what dangers, possibilities or treats may lie ahead. This is the position we find ourselves in. But we need to remind ourselves that are not completely powerless.

As always, we include a number of book reviews which reflect not only this range, but also the skills of the reviewers to do more than just give a summary the works in question. They are reviews and, as such, they resemble academic papers in their own right.

Last but not least, the SEA is very pleased to publish at the same time as this issue, a special edition of *Existential Analysis* devoted to the work and memory of Dr Hans W. Cohn who died twenty years ago this January. We are indebted to Sarah Young for making this possible.

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