Giacomo Leopardi and the Roots of Existentialism

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Short Abstract

This study redefines the origins of existentialism by positioning the Italian poet and philosopher Giacomo Leopardi (1798-1837) as the initiator of atheistic existentialism. In his notebooks, the *Zibaldone*, Leopardi formulates what can be read as the foundational principle of existentialism: 'existence precedes essence'. Throughout his writings he also expresses the typical affective states of existentialism: existential boredom, anguish, alienation, and the absurd. Leopardi offers the first integrated formulation of both the existentialist principle and the existentialist *Stimmung*. The existentialist principle underpins Leopardi's work entirely. The main consequences of such principle are the absence of God, the absurdity of existence, and the freedom of the individual. These points place Leopardi in remarkable alignment with 20th-century atheist existentialists such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Simone de Beauvoir, and Martin Heidegger. Previous scholarship has limited itself to tracing isolated affinities between Leopardi and single existentialists. This project demonstrates that their alignment is both more profound and more systematic than has previously been acknowledged. Through such mediators as Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Unamuno, and others, Leopardi's works can be shown to have influenced, more or less directly, the existentialists. Leopardi also pioneers a mode of literature-philosophy that rejects formal logic and embraces poetry as a means of creating meaning in an otherwise meaningless existence. Indeed, poetry is the only means to create values that can sustain us in the face of existential absurdity. Many of these elements are to be found in Kierkegaard, yet neither atheism nor the idea that existence precedes essence are present in his work. Kierkegaard must therefore be regarded as the initiator of religious existentialism only, while it is Leopardi who stands at the roots of its atheistic form.

Long Abstract

This study sets out to solve two main problems: (1) is there such a thing as a foundational idea of Leopardi's thought? and (2) where is the beginning of existentialism to be placed? The answers provided in this work are that (1) a foundational idea of Leopardi's thought can be identified in what this study terms the existentialist foundational idea that 'existence precedes essence'; and that (2) the beginning of existentialism, at least in its atheistic form, should be placed in the work of Leopardi. These problems, and their answers, were prompted by the striking similarities one finds by reading Leopardi and the existentialists comparatively. Although scholars have long been aware of such similarities, discussions have never advanced beyond passing remarks. Moreover, scholarship has limited itself to record the co-occurrence, in Leopardi and the existentialists, of such themes as existential boredom, anguish, the question of the meaning of existence, and other problems that later became typical of existentialism. This project shows that the relationship is far more substantial and far-reaching than these thematic parallels suggest.

Methodologically, the project adopts three complementary approaches. First, it offers a systematic comparison between Leopardi and the existentialists, expanding the scattered observations found in previous scholarship. Second, it employs a 'diffractive reading' of Leopardi toward the existentialists, showing that his thought reached them through mediating figures such as Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Unamuno, and others – thus exerting an indirect influence. Third, it presents new evidence for the direct influence of Leopardi on the existentialists in the form of explicit quotations hitherto unnoticed, most notably in the works of Heidegger and Beauvoir. These findings, so I believe, have significant implications for Leopardi scholarship and beyond. All three methodologies

are required if all the different connections between Leopardi and the existentialists are to be accounted for.

The main scholarly contributions of this thesis are as follows. Chapter 1 argues that Leopardi formulates a view that can be interpreted as the foundational principle of existentialism as later expressed by Sartre: 'existence precedes essence'. I define this as the 'existentialist principle'. Its meaning is that nothing precedes the existence of things in such a way as to determine what they are: things exist first, and their essence is decided only afterwards. This applies, first and foremost, to human beings: we first come into the world (existence), and only afterwards do we decide who to be (essence). No being other than ourselves can decide that for us – that is, no friend, no parent, no God. This idea can be shown to occur at various points of Leopardi's writings, but its clearest formulation is found on page 1616 of the *Zibaldone*: 'Niente preesiste alle cose. Nè forme, o idee, nè necessità nè ragione di essere, e di essere così o così ec. ec. *Tutto* è posteriore all'*esistenza*' (*Zib*. 1616. 3 settembre 1821; italics in the original). The existentialist principle can be read as the framework underpinning Leopardi's beliefs in virtually all human domains: from theology, ethics, aesthetics, to anthropology, ontology, and epistemology. On the level of theology, the existentialist principle entails the absence of God: if human beings come into the world without any prior essence, then the very idea of a pre-existing Being who creates them is ruled out. This explains why most 20th-century existentialists were atheists. On the level of ethics and ontology, the existentialist principle entails the relativity of moral values and indeed of being itself ('*Tutto è relativo*', *Zib*. 452): the notions of good and evil (ethics) are relative and only emerge a posteriori, just as the identity of things (ontology) arises only once we give them meaning.

Chapter 2 is devoted to the case of the human being. On the level of anthropology, therefore, the existentialist principle entails that human beings are 'condemned to be free',

as Sartre famously said. This shows this idea to be present and relevant in Leopardi as well: if no God prescribes how we are to act, then we are radically free to decide about that and shape ourselves in virtually infinite ways. This radical conception of freedom is embraced by Sartre and, as this study demonstrates, by Leopardi, but not by Kierkegaard, for whom human essence ultimately lies in the hands of God. On this basis, Leopardi also rejects the idea of a fixed human nature – a view he shares with Sartre but one that Kierkegaard would never have accepted. The shaping of our essence depends instead on our habits, on our environment, and above all on the choices we make throughout our existence.

The third and final chapter focuses on epistemology and deals with the ultimate consequences of the existentialist principle for human life. Leopardi and the existentialists hold that the non-rational knowledge conveyed by art precedes the rational knowledge conveyed by logic. In this sense, art is more *originary* – more fundamental – than logic: it lies closer to what it means to be human and is therefore better suited to make human existence meaningful. The philosophy of Leopardi and later existentialists stands in sharp contrast to the rationalist-computational approach that dominated Modern European thought, at least from Descartes onwards. This is the kind of philosophy that, thanks to the developments of Leibniz, Boole, Frege, Turing, and others, has today produced Artificial Intelligence. Often described as 'essentialist', this philosophical approach is precisely what 'existentialism' arose to contest. For the existentialists, logic and reason, when employed to their full potential, only reveal the tragic character of existence: God does not exist, we are thrown into this absurd existence without explanation, and no rational account seems capable of explaining why we are here or for whose benefit. Existentialists thus seek an alternative to the conception of philosophy as an epiphenomenon of logic, or as a weaker version of science. Because logic and reason end

up only revealing our unhappiness, we must turn to the other side we are, after all, made of: our feelings, our unjustifiable values, and those beliefs of ours which, even if false, can give us a reason to live. With existentialism, the aim of philosophy becomes to provide answers on which to build our existence, however tentatively and rather imperfectly. Poetry is not quite as clear or unshakable as logic or science, but it is the only way to create values that make the absurdity of existence worth enduring: science, to date, cannot do that. Thus, while Wittgenstein and the logical positivists attempted to transform philosophy into the logical clarification of thought, in the service of science, existentialists sought to transform it into a poetic mode of thinking: less precise, perhaps, but more vital.

All the above considerations led me to the conclusion that Kierkegaard, who is usually regarded as the 'father' of existentialism in general, is better understood as the initiator of its religious variant alone. Indeed, the two features that define Sartrean existentialism – atheism and the existentialist principle – are absent in Kierkegaard. The first is excluded by his Christian commitments; the second by his adherence to what may be called the 'essentialist principle', according to which essence precedes existence. That Kierkegaard still endorses 'essentialism' has been shown – to my own surprise – by the work of Kierkegaard scholar John Elrod. This, however, is after all consistent with the fact that Kierkegaard's philosophy is still heavily based on God. Sartre, on the other hand, maintains that there is no essence preceding existence only because there is no God to conceive it. Thus, if God is reintroduced into the equation, essence once again becomes prior to existence. Atheism is therefore a necessary condition for existentialism, at least in the technical sense of the term employed in this study. Unlike Kierkegaard, Leopardi explicitly displays both components of Sartre's existentialism: the existentialist principle and a thoroughly atheistic worldview.

The originality of this thesis lies in three main contributions. First, it uncovers both the direct and indirect influence of Leopardi on major figures of 20th-century European thought. Second, it interprets Leopardi's thought as a form of existentialism, thereby offering a new conceptual framework through which to read his work. Third – and perhaps most importantly – it places Leopardi at the beginning of atheistic existentialism. These conclusions call for a substantial reorientation of mainly two domains of scholarship. For scholars in Italian Studies, this thesis offers a new lens through which to reconsider Leopardi's entire oeuvre. For intellectual historians and scholars of existentialism, it identifies Leopardi as the initiator of atheistic existentialism, from whom any future account of the movement should begin.

Acknowledgements

In my youth, I could not have fathomed a greater personal realisation than the one this DPhil provided. Redefining our understanding of Leopardi and the existentialists, the authors closest to my heart, and doing so in the magic of Oxford, has simply been the most fulfilling experience of my life.

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Finally, my thoughts go to my family, the very condition of possibility of all this, and to Sophie – this work embodies the aspirations of us both.

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Editions of the *Canti*[1]

Ar	Autografi recanatesi
An	Autografi napoletani
Av	Autografi vissani
R18	*Canzoni* | *di* | *Giacomo Leopardi* | — | *Sull'Italia* | *Sul Monumento di Dante che si prepara* | *in Firenze* | Roma MDCCCXVIII. | Presso Francesco Bourlié
R18c	Correzioni manoscritte di Leopardi sulla stampa di R18 (see Leopardi 2009b, 20-21)
B20	*Canzone* | *di* | *Giacomo Leopardi* | *ad* | *Angelo Mai* | — | Bologna. MDCCCXX | Per le stampe di Iacopo Marsigli | Con approvazione
B24	*Canzoni* | *del conte* | *Giacomo Leopardi* | Bologna | Pei tipi del Nobili e Comp.° | 1824
Bc	Due elenchi manoscritti di correzioni e variazioni a B24 (see Leopardi 2009b, tavv. 180-183)
Nr	*Il* | *Nuovo Ricoglitore* | *ossia* | *Archivj* | *di geografia, di viaggi, di filosofia,* | *d'istoria, di economia politica, di elo-*|*quenza, di poesia, di critica, di archeo-*|*logia, di novelle, di belle arti, di teatri* | *e feste, di bibliografia e di miscellanee* | *Opera che succede allo Spettatore italiano* | *e straniero, ed al Ricoglitore.* | … | Milano | Presso Ant. Fort. Stella e Figli (anno I, parte II, N° 12, Dicembre 1825; anno II, parte I, N° 1, Gennaio 1826)
B26	*Versi* | *del conte* | *Giacomo Leopardi* | Bologna 1826 | Dalla Stamperia delle Muse | Strada Stefano n. 76 | Con approvazione
F31	*Canti* | *del conte* | *Giacomo Leopardi*. | — Firenze | Presso Guglielmo Piatti | 1831
N35	Cosiddetta edizione Starita: *Canti* | *di* | *Giacomo Leopardi.* | *Edizione corretta, accresciuta,* | *e sola approvata dall'autore*. | Napoli, | presso Saverio Starita | Strada Quercia n.14 | — | 1835
N35c=F45	Cosiddetta Starita corretta […]: esemplare sciolto costituito da fogli di stampa di N […]; su questo esemplare Leopardi fece correzioni e aggiunte per la stampa progettata dal libraio parigino Baudry e che […] si doveva intitolare *Canti* | *di* | *Giacomo Leopardi.* | *Edizione corretta ed accresciuta* | *dall'autore*. [Queste lezioni sono confluite nell'edizione delle *Opere di Giacomo Leopardi* a cura di Antonio Ranieri stampata a Firenze per Felice Le Monnier – author's note].

[1] This table is based on the lists given by Emilio Peruzzi (in Leopardi 2009b, 10-12) and Franco Gavazzeni (in Leopardi 2009a, LV-LVI). All the descriptions, unless otherwise stated, are Peruzzi's.

Introduction[2]

...sarà proprio necessario elaborare un sistema e praticarlo? o non sarà più salutare prendere coscienza di non avere sistema?
(Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo*)

1. The problems

This project was born out of the need to address the following two problems:

1. Where and when does existentialism start?

2. Is there a foundational idea of Leopardi's thought? And if so, what is it?

Whether these problems are successfully resolved in this work will be for the reader to determine. For now, let us bring them into sharper focus.

1. It is customary to set the beginning of existentialism in the work of Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855). This, however, involves two major difficulties.

1.1 By virtue of his being a Christian, Kierkegaard can at most be considered the initiator of religious existentialism, and certainly not of atheistic existentialism. This is relevant because, when one thinks of existentialism, one probably has in mind the atheist existentialists: Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Martin Heidegger are all commonly regarded as atheist thinkers. The second difficulty is closely related.

1.2 Kierkegaard never wrote that existence precedes essence, and 'existence precedes essence' is most widely held as the fundamental idea defining existentialism. Not only

[2] This work follows the Chicago style (18th edition), using the author-date-page format for quotations. The list of the works cited is given, for ease of reference, in a separate document.

did Kierkegaard never embrace this thesis, but he in fact endorsed the opposite one: 'essence precedes existence'.[3] In *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, among other things, Sartre sketches a genealogy of existentialism – a passage that will prove crucial for the purposes of this work:

> Eighteenth-century atheistic philosophers suppressed the idea of God, but not, for all that, the idea that essence precedes existence. We encounter this idea nearly everywhere: in the works of Diderot, Voltaire, and even Kant. […] Here again [*sc*. in Kant's works], the essence of man [the human being – author's note] precedes his [or her – author's note] historically primitive existence in nature.[4] Atheistic existentialism, which I represent, is more consistent. It states that if God does not exist, there is at least one being in whom existence precedes essence – a being whose existence comes before its essence, a being who exists before he can be defined by any concept of it. That being is man (Sartre [1946] 2007, 21-22).[5]

We shall return to this passage for its theoretical implications; for now, let us consider it from a historical point of view. From Diderot, Voltaire, and Kant, Sartre makes an almost 150-year leap to himself:[6] how is such a leap to be accounted for? It seems more plausible to hypothesise that there is in fact no leap, and that, as this project contends, the passage from atheism to the precedence of existence over essence takes place in Leopardi's writings – right after, and partly as a reaction to, Diderot, Voltaire, and Kant. Kierkegaard displays neither atheism nor the idea that existence precedes essence. Leopardi does and, through Nietzsche and other authors discussed below, came to influence existentialism. The rest of this work is a defence of this hypothesis.

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[3] This problem, one of the major ones of this work, is treated in the most important section of the thesis: Chapter 1, section 5.

[4] Some of the quotations and/or translations we will encounter throughout do not pay attention to gender biases. Rather than intervening in every single instance, which I thought would disrupt the flow of reading, I have decided to signal the issue to the reader in this opening section, so that it can be kept in mind for all subsequent quotations.

[5] Au XVIIIe siècle, dans l'athéisme des philosophes, la notion de Dieu est supprimée, mais non pas pour autant l'idée que l'essence précède l'existence. Cette idée, nous la retrouvons un peu partout : nous la retrouvons chez Diderot, chez Voltaire, et même chez Kant. […] Ainsi, là encore [*sc*. chez Kant], l'essence d'homme précède cette existence historique que nous rencontrons dans la nature. L'existentialisme athée, que je représente, est plus cohérent. Il déclare que si Dieu n'existe pas, il y a au moins un être chez qui l'existence précède l'essence, un être qui existe avant de pouvoir être défini par aucun concept et que cet être c'est l'homme (Sartre 1966, 20-21).

[6] Kant died in 1804 and *Being and Nothingness* was published in 1943.

2. The quest for a foundational idea of Leopardi's thought is something Leopardi scholars have long been concerned with. The first caveat here is that the notion of a foundational idea of Leopardi's thought does not necessarily entail the systematic nature of such thought: this is the unwarranted assumption the scholarship on Leopardi can sometimes be found prone to. Philosophical beliefs and ideas can follow more or less logically, and indeed, more or less systematically from a first, foundational idea. I will show that a non-systematic, and at times outrightly contradictory, way of creating philosophical ideas is indeed the one that applies to Leopardi. That there is no such thing as a non-systematic philosophy is a Hegelian notion which has sometimes informed Leopardi scholarship, but, arguably, never Leopardi himself.[7] One could probably claim uncontested that such a foundational idea has not yet been found, at least not consensually. I propose a new one, which has not been considered so far and which, I argue, underpins all the other ideas scholars have so far advanced. The idea I propose as the foundational one of Leopardi's thought is precisely that 'existence precedes essence', which is also the foundational idea of existentialism (Barrett 1962, 102; Webber 2018, 14; Aho 2023 et al.).[8] Let us clarify immediately what that means. It means that we first come into this world (existence), and that only afterwards do we decide who we are to be (essence); no being other than ourselves can decide that for us – that is, no friend, no parent, no God. More details about the genesis and context of this principle are given below. The principle I am proposing,

[7] That Leopardi's thought is arguably far better understood non-systematically is further explained below. The reader will find in the Conclusion of this work a complete account of why the label of 'existentialism', alongside implying no systematicity, allows us to encompass and combine many of the labels the thought of Leopardi has been traditionally defined with.

[8] There is another line of scholars who deny that there is such thing as a foundational principle of existentialism, noting the variety of positions endorsed by the existentialists (cf., for instance, Kaufmann 1975, 40; Solomon 2005, 20). I believe, however, that identifying a principle is possible, and hermeneutically indispensable, as the only way to allow some kind of distinction between those who should be called existentialists in the proper sense and those who should not. There is much to be gained from the clarity and simplicity the principle provides, and, if one rejects this one as the defining principle, one also loses any possibility to qualify existentialism with any one clear theoretical trait.

as one can immediately appreciate, is maximally simple and – this is my promise – maximally powerful to account for Leopardi's beliefs across virtually all human domains. My suggestion, therefore, is that the problem of Leopardi's thought is closely related to the problem of the roots of existentialism.

These two problems can be solved in one move by considering Leopardi as the initiator of atheistic existentialism. Historically speaking, he was Kierkegaard's contemporary (Leopardi, 1798-1837; Kierkegaard, 1813-1855); theoretically speaking, he clearly exhibits both the ideas Sartre takes to be defining of existentialism: atheism and the precedence of existence over essence. This solution has two further important consequences: a. the foundational principle of existentialism – 'existence precedes essence' – is also the foundational principle of Leopardi's thought; b. the existentialist principle and its atheistic connotation constitute Leopardi's greatest contribution to subsequent thought – an idea that, through Nietzsche, influenced 20th-century existentialism.

2. Why Leopardi and existentialism?

One might wonder how the conjunction of Leopardi and existentialism came to be conceived as a line of inquiry in the first place. This is how one of the greatest scholars of existentialism, William Barrett (1913-1992), introduces the existentialists:

> Alienation and estrangement; a sense of the basic fragility and contingency of human life; the impotence of reason confronted with the depths of existence; the threat of Nothingness, and the solitary and unsheltered condition of the individual before this threat. […] A single atmosphere pervades them all like a chilly wind: the radical feeling of human finitude (Barrett 1962, 36).

Even a superficial familiarity with Leopardi is enough to be struck by how extensively these themes overlap with his. One may therefore be tempted to establish the limits of such extent, and I certainly was. Possibly even more instructive is the contrast that Nicola Abbagnano (1901-1990), one of the greatest Italian existentialists, draws between romanticism and existentialism. This contrastive description is given in his *Dizionario di filosofia* (1971), under the entry for the term 'esistenzialismo'. The reader can clearly see on which side Leopardi more properly falls:

> 1. Il Romanticismo afferma che nell'uomo agisce una forza infinita (Umanità, Ragione, Assoluto, Spirito, ecc.) di cui egli è solo manifestazione. L'Esistenzialismo afferma che l'uomo è una realtà finita, che esiste ed opera a suo rischio e pericolo.
>
> 2. Il R. afferma che il mondo […] ha un ordine che garantisce necessariamente la riuscita finale delle azioni umane. L'E. afferma che l'uomo è 'gettato nel mondo', […] che può rendere vane o impossibili le sue iniziative.
>
> 3. Il R. afferma il progresso continuo e fatale dell'umanità. L'E. disconosce […] la nozione stessa di progresso.
>
> 4. Il R. ha sempre una certa tendenza spiritualistica […] a scapito di ciò che è terrestre, materiale […]. L'E. riconosce senza pudori […] l'esteriorità, la materialità.
>
> 5. Il R. considera insignificanti certi aspetti negativi dell'esperienza umana, come il dolore, […], la malattia, la morte, perché essi non toccano il principio infinito […]. L'E. considera tali aspetti particolarmente significativi per la realtà umana e fa leva soprattutto su di essi per interpretarla.

One can also see clearly that this contrast was drawn by an existentialist, who was arguably being somewhat unfair to romanticism. And yet the overarching point holds

true: even if one did not consider Leopardi a romantic in the first place, it is still a significant hermeneutical gain to acknowledge that he is far better suited to existentialism than to romanticism. Abbagnano has Kierkegaard in mind when writing this passage, and yet Leopardi fits just as rightfully – and perhaps, as I will show, even better.

3. What is existentialism?

The extensive scholarship on existentialism generally discourages one from considering existentialism as a unified school of thought, and indeed it would be absurd to treat Kierkegaard and Sartre, Dostoevsky and Heidegger, as expressing the same ideas. There certainly are common themes, but the conclusions are too divergent to be reduced to a single philosophical movement. The most fruitful approach seems to be to distinguish two components within existentialism: the 'emotional' component and the theoretical one. By the former, I mean the array of feelings that existentialists express towards existence. The most common are anguish, boredom, and alienation.[9] In this 'emotional' sense Blaise Pascal is sometimes described as an existentialist or existential thinker (Dreyfus 2012; Aho 2020; Pattison 2023 et al.). This component produces a first, loose, and non-technical definition of existentialism, which is still sometimes used. Under this definition, both religious and atheist existentialists are correctly included, and it is in fact customary to include very many writers and artists as well.[10] As David Cooper writes, however, 'novelists such as Dostoevsky and Kafka, or poets like Rilke […address] themes that recur in existentialist writings – anxiety and alienation, […] – but none of them locates these themes within a general philosophical perspective' (Cooper 2012, 31). I therefore propose that, when Kierkegaard himself is defined as an existentialist, such definition should be understood in this 'emotional' sense. That Leopardi displays the

[9] These feelings are treated in Chapter 1 section 3.

[10] Some scholars go as far as to include names like Rainer Maria Rilke, Gabriel García Márquez, and Philip Roth (Solomon 2005). On this trajectory, a case could be made for the inclusion of some who are not necessarily writers, like Alberto Giacometti and Paul Gauguin who certainly have dealt with 'existential' themes in their works. It is clear that the 'emotional' definition is so broad that its usefulness is rightly doubted.

emotional traits of existentialism is something long recognised by the scholarship, and is otherwise more widely documented below.[11]

The technical component of existentialism is the belief that existence precedes essence, as I noted above. This component produces a much tighter definition of existentialism, under which only atheist existentialists – Sartre, Beauvoir, Camus, et al. – should be included.[12] Only the authors to whom the existentialist principle applies can be defined as 'existentialists' in this strict, technical sense. My contention is that Leopardi justifiably belongs to this subset of authors, too.

3.1 The meaning of the existentialist principle

Because I attach such a great importance to the existentialist principle, it is now time to analyse it more deeply. The idea was made famous and explained it in the most straightforward terms in Sartre's famous conference *Existentialism Is a humanism* (1946).[13] Sartre defines it as follows:

> What do we mean here by 'existence precedes essence'? We mean that man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterward defines himself. If man as existentialists conceive of him cannot be defined, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus, there is no human nature since there is no God to conceive of it. Man is not only that which he conceives himself to be, but that which he wills himself to be, and since he conceives of himself only after he exists, just as he wills himself to be after being thrown into existence, man is nothing other than what he makes of himself. This is the first principle of existentialism (Sartre 2007, 22).[14]

[11] See Chapter 1 section 3. For the main problems associated with defining existentialism see Wahl 1947 and Abbagnano 1948.

[12] A more comprehensive list of religious and atheist existentialists is given in the following section.

[13] The idea also recurs explicitly in *Being and Nothingness* (see Sartre 2020, 577): Sartre's masterpiece is in fact entirely grounded in this fundamental idea. The text will not lack the appropriate degree of complexity and depth in due course (see Chapter 1 section 5).

[14] Qu'est-ce que signifie ici que l'existence précède l'essence ? Cela signifie que l'homme existe d'abord, se rencontre, surgit dans le monde, et qu'il se définit après. L'homme, tel que le conçoit l'existentialiste, s'il n'est pas définissable, c'est qu'il n'est d'abord rien. Il ne sera qu'ensuite, et il sera tel qu'il se sera fait. Ainsi, il n'y a pas de nature humaine, puisqu'il n'y a pas de Dieu pour la concevoir. L'homme est non seulement tel qu'il se conçoit, mais tel qu'il se veut, et comme il se conçoit après l'existence, comme il se veut après cet élan vers l'existence, l'homme n'est rien d'autre que ce qu'il se fait. Tel est le premier principe de l'existentialisme (Sartre [1946] 1966, 21-22). In this project we will be mostly concerned with the so-called 'first Sartre', that is, Sartre's work until the mid-1950s (see Howells 1988, 1).

Sartre goes on by distinguishing a religious and an atheist line within existentialism, without realising, however, that he has just defined the movement in such a way that a religious existentialism is a contradiction in terms. This problem can be quickly resolved by tracing religious existentialism back purely to the emotional component explained above and by reserving the technical one to atheistic existentialism. Indeed, if existentialism is understood as the philosophy that endorses the precedence of existence over essence – because there is no God to conceive of our essence before our existence – then there is no such thing as a religious existentialism. At the end of his speech, Sartre states explicitly that existentialism (technically understood) can only be atheistic: 'existentialism is merely an attempt to draw all of the conclusions inferred by a consistently atheistic point of view' (Sartre 2007, 53).[15] Thus, if one is to accept Sartre's terms, one must conclude that Leopardi is the initiator of existentialism *tout court*.

Saying that no essence precedes our existence equals saying that there is no such thing a Platonic universal essence of the human being, which would ontologically precede all the actual human beings and give them meaning. That is instead the case for objects, which are realised starting from a pre-existing model of them, and so they *exist* after their *essence*. The human being is preceded by no model. This frame does not apply to Kierkegaard, for whom our essence is chosen by God before our existence: 'God chose Adam's essence', writes Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* (2020, 699).[16] The features of existentialism we are all familiar with are after all consequences of the absence of God: only if God does not exist, is the human being alone with no hope to anchor itself to

[15] 'L'existentialisme n'est pas autre chose qu'un effort pour tirer toutes les conséquences d'une position athée cohérente' (Sartre 1966, 93).
[16] 'Dieu a choisi l'essence d'Adam' (Sartre 1943, 583). Of course, Sartre's framework entails that any form of Christianity is Platonic, which is clearly a problematic claim – my thanks go to Christina Howells and David Cooper for bringing this problem to my attention (in private conversations). This, however, falls well beyond the scope of this essay. In any case, the fact remains that 'existence precedes essence', for how Sartre, and Leopardi, understands it, is an atheistic idea.

anything absolute and stable, there are no universal values, nor orders that can legitimise our conduct, and there is nothing written anywhere about what is right and what is wrong. Only if God does not exist, are we truly alone with no excuses (see Sartre 2007, 29). This situation Sartre famously defined as a condemnation to freedom: 'condemned, because he [*sc*. the human being] did not create himself, yet nonetheless free, because once cast into the world, he is responsible for everything he does' (Sartre 2007, 29).[17]

[17] 'Condamné, parce qu'il ne s'est pas créé lui-même, et par ailleurs cependant libre, parce qu'une fois jeté dans le monde, il est responsable de tout ce qu'il fait' (Sartre 1966, 36).

4. Brief history of existentialism

One of the most recurring questions about existentialism is how far back its beginning should be set. The distinction between the emotional and the technical components of existentialism allows for a clear answer. The set of authors encompassed by the emotional definition is so broad that some scholars mention Augustine or even Socrates, mainly for their insistence on subjectivity. It is clear why this category is too broad to be useful. There is some merit, however, in discerning elements of existentialism so early in the history of thought, if only to place existentialists within a greater intellectual context.[18]

After Socrates (470-399 BCE), the very first references sometimes mentioned are the *Book of Qohélet*, for its questions about the meaning of universal existence, and the *Book of Job*, for Job's protest against God (see Pattison and Kirkpatrick 2018, 14 ff.).[19] Existentialism scholar Kevin Aho quite rightly mentions Stoicism afterwards, especially Seneca (4 BCE-65 CE) and Epictetus (50-135 CE) (see Aho 2020), mainly for their stress on individuality as a means to an authentic existence. The next reference usually mentioned is St. Augustine (354-430). As Barrett writes, 'Augustine had an almost voluptuous sensitivity to the Self in its inner inquietude, its trembling and frailty, its longing to reach beyond itself in love; where Plato and Aristotle had asked the question, "What is man?"', Barrett continues, 'St. Augustine […] asks, "Who am I?" – and this shift is decisive' (1962, 95).

After Augustine, Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) has sometimes been mentioned as a philosopher who thought that existence precedes essence. Such is the thesis advanced by Étienne Gilson (1952, 94) and, in his wake, Barrett himself (1962, 104 ff.); others,

[18] Leopardi himself, for instance, immediately after formulating his version of the existentialist principle (see Chapter 1 section 5), mentions Augustine as someone who expressed something similar.
[19] The *Book of Qohélet* is most convincingly dated around 3rd century BCE ca. according to Bolin 2024. The book of Job 'must have been written at least prior to the 2nd or 1st century BCE' (Doak 2021).

however, remain unconvinced (Wippel 1982, 395). As a matter of fact, this is still an open question in the scholarship on Aquinas. In any case, even if one could convincingly prove that the precedence of existence over essence does in fact apply to Thomism, it would be unthinkable to claim that Aquinas means by that what Sartre means by that. That my essence is absolutely nothing before my actual existence and that it is created by me through my own, unjustifiable choices is inconceivable in a Medieval context. In this sense the precedence of existence over essence is a fundamentally atheistic and modern idea.

Moving forward, manuals usually focus on Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) and, more importantly, Blaise Pascal (1623-1662). The importance of these authors lies again in their increasing insistence on subjectivity as a key element for understanding ourselves and the world. There is another author who, albeit rarely cited, is much closer to existentialism than any of his predecessors or contemporaries: Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494).[20] Pascal's *Pensées* (1670) include some profound reflections on the meaning of existence, and Pico's *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1486) treats the human being remarkably similarly to how Leopardi and Sartre will do so afterwards.[21] The most scrupulous and rigorous accounts also treat Kant and German Idealism before Kierkegaard (Solomon 2001), though these are important more by way of contrast than by continuity with existentialism. For this reason, I refer the reader to the work of Robert Solomon (2001) and begin to focus on the actual beginning of existentialism.

[20] This reference was suggested to me by David Cooper in a private conversation: its credit thus goes to him, together with my sincere gratitude.
[21] Pascal and Pico will be mentioned more broadly in the relevant sections of this work.

Giacomo Leopardi (1798-1837) and Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) knew deeply all the authors just mentioned and built their existentialism upon their work.[22] I propose to rewrite this chapter of the history of existentialism by positioning Leopardi at the beginning of atheistic existentialism (and therefore of existentialism technically understood), and Kierkegaard at the beginning of religious existentialism only. This thesis is developed and further substantiated throughout the text. This, as I shall argue more fully, is the best framework to account for the distinction, omnipresent in contemporary scholarship, between atheistic and religious existentialism.

The religious line thus starts with Kierkegaard and includes, above all, Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881), Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936), Martin Buber (1878-1965), Karl Jaspers (1883-1969), Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973), Luigi Pareyson (1918-1991), and Alberto Caracciolo (1918-1990). It is important to state again that none of these religious thinkers endorsed the existentialist principle that existence precedes essence. The atheistic line, on the other hand, starts with Leopardi and includes, above all, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), Nicola Abbagnano (1901-1990), Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), Alberto Moravia (1907-1990), Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986), Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), Cesare Luporini (1909-1993), and Albert Camus (1913-1960).[23] Sartre writes that the only idea they all share is 'the belief that existence precedes essence; or, if you prefer, that subjectivity must be our point of departure' (Sartre 2007, 20).[24] The two, however, are not quite the same concept: religious

[22] On Leopardi and the Bible see Palmieri 2000, Petruzzi 2007, and Kay 2023; on Leopardi and Montaigne, see D'Intino 2017b and Vincieri 2005; on Leopardi and Pascal see Severino 1990, Savoca 1999, and Abbadessa 2019.

[23] It is a well-known fact that many of these authors, including Heidegger and Camus, rejected the label of 'existentialist'. That happened, however, more for social reasons than theoretical ones. The canonical scholarship treats all the atheist existentialists together, and so will I. The relevant caveats for Nietzsche are included in the relevant sections.

[24] 'ils estiment que l'existence précède l'essence, ou, si vous voulez, qu'il faut partir de la subjectivité' (Sartre 1966, 17).

existentialists do start from subjectivity, but only to find something that has already been prepared for them by God.[25] The notion that truth lies in our intimacy and its religious connotation is as relevant for Augustine as it is for Kierkegaard. Yet, looking for God in the silence of our soul is one thing; disregarding any external being and relying solely on ourselves to create our own, unjustifiable values, perhaps even in contradiction with those Christianity teaches, is quite another – and an unthinkable one for Augustine or Kierkegaard.[26]

4.1 The existentialists in a nutshell

A few lines on each of the authors mentioned will help keep the thought of the existentialists in view before proceeding. Let us begin with the religious existentialists.

Kierkegaard is best known for his notion of existential anguish, generated by the difficult choices that existence – and God – calls us to make.

Dostoevsky's central problem is the existence of God, as he himself declared (see Dostoevsky 1964, 190, 25 March 1870). Crucial for existentialism is his claim that if God does not exist, everything is permitted (2008, 691).

Unamuno advances a vitalistic and even irrational interpretation of Christianity, claiming that, even if we are not rationally persuaded of God's existence, believing irrationally is the only way to rescue ourselves from nothingness and meaninglessness.

[25] As he was himself to acknowledge later, Sartre was too simplistic in his analysis of existentialism offered at the Conference (see Sartre 2012, 42-44).
[26] This point is more broadly discussed throughout the essay.

Jaspers argues that it is in experiences of failures and inadequacy that we find the real meaning of existence: surrendering ourselves and our demands for rational meaning is the only way to save ourselves from meaninglessness.[27]

Atheist existentialists sought non-religious ways to rescue themselves from nothingness and meaninglessness.

Nietzsche's major contribution to existentialism is what is sometimes called his 'active nihilism', i.e. the doctrine that the individual must create her or his own values independently of the ones recommended by tradition, especially Christianity.

Heidegger maintains that the main feature of the human being is to question her or his own being: this occurs through the key experiences of anguish and alienation from the world (what he calls 'thrownness').

Heidegger's reflections paved the way for Sartre's crucial notion that the existence of the human being precedes her or his essence – the foundational principle of existentialism. Only on this account can there be real freedom – the one theme existentialism is probably best known for.

Beauvoir played a key role in debunking our assumed faith in the absoluteness of values. She did include religion but extended her critique to all forms of authority. She also contributed, perhaps more than anyone else, to the formation and recognition of existentialism as a philosophical movement.

Camus developed the notion of estrangement and formulated that of the absurd, for which he is best known: existence is an absurdity that nothing can ever resolve.[28]

[27] Buber and Marcel will not be treated in this study. Italian existentialists are also less present than the others. Existentialism, however, was an important phenomenon in Italy as well, and Italian existentialists mention Leopardi extensively. A study of Leopardi's influence on existentialism, including the Italian one, will be out soon.

[28] Merleau-Ponty is also not treated in this study.

5. The methodologies

Methodologically, the first question that might come to mind is whether the existentialists read Leopardi. There is an extent, however, to which this is a misplaced worry. There are many existentialists whose 'influence' on other existentialists remains to be proven, and yet – here is the point – scholars of existentialism almost never bother to attempt such proofs. Miguel de Unamuno is one such existentialist: he is included in almost every anthology and yet there is no evidence that Sartre, Beauvoir, Heidegger, or Camus read him. Unamuno, like others, is included because he deals with the typical themes of existentialism, asks himself the same questions, and arrives at similar answers, using the same philosophical language. His inclusion in the movement of existentialism, therefore, makes sense from a theoretical, historical, and linguistic standpoint, even prescinding from evidence of direct influence. On this basis, scholars do not even feel the need to undertake the long and potentially sterile process of proving that every existentialist read and influenced every other existentialist (see, for example, Solomon 2005). That is, at least, how scholars of existentialism have proceeded so far. The case of Unamuno is in all respects akin to Leopardi's.

I have thus chosen to consider proof of direct influence, if not indifferent, at least secondary, for the purposes of including Leopardi within existentialism. And yet I nonetheless sought to uncover what was to be uncovered in terms of influence, direct and indirect. This work, therefore, develops on three levels, each relating to a different methodology: first, a level of similarities (and relevant differences) between Leopardi and the existentialists; second, a level of indirect influence by Leopardi on the existentialists through diffraction via intermediaries; and third, a level of direct influence, often through a direct reading of Leopardi's texts by the existentialists. These three levels are mutually

supportive, rather than exclusive, and increasingly powerful to connect Leopardi and the existentialists, even though, again, the project would be successfully justified on the basis of the first two levels alone. This threefold division is necessary to account for the different modes of engagement between Leopardi and the existentialists: some authors are just 'similar' to Leopardi (e.g. Kierkegaard); some encountered his name and works through the works of other authors but do not mention him (e.g. Sartre); some do mention him, and they have either read him directly (e.g. Unamuno) or were struck by his mentions in other authors (e.g. Beauvoir). Depending on the level, one can more or less properly speak of Leopardi's 'influence' on existentialism.

5.1 First level: similarities (and relevant differences)

On the first level of analysis, I show the similarities and the relevant differences between Leopardi and the existentialists. This, of course, is not done for its own sake, but to provide a new lens through which to read Leopardi's thought. At this level, we are not concerned with how Leopardi may have influenced existentialism, but rather how the lens of existentialism actualises hidden 'virtuals' in Leopardi's thought, and which only such lens can actualise.[29] Then, because 'similitudes show themselves instructive only through differences' as Masson-Oursel writes in *Comparative Philosophy* (1926, 39), I also stress the relevant differences between Leopardi and the existentialists: the reader will see in what sense Leopardi has his own existentialism. This 'thematic' and 'comparative' approach has been used in Leopardi Studies not only by Alessandra Aloisi but also by Toni Negri, who drew a comparison between Leopardi and Spinoza based on 'una

[29] I apply Deleuze's notion of 'virtual' to Leopardi and existentialism in the way Alessandra Aloisi did with Leopardi and Agamben (see Aloisi 2017). For the notion in Deleuze, see Deleuze 1994, ch. II and ch. IV.

continuità di strutture filosofiche, ben piantate sullo sviluppo storico e culturale di una civiltà, di un tempo definito, di una problematica adeguata' (Negri 2006, 345), and Massimiliano Biscuso (2019), who declares such an approach 'plausibile e fecondo' (2019, 18). Negri's notion of 'continuità di strutture filosofiche' is after all akin to what Arthur Lovejoy means by 'unit-idea' (1964, 3), a notion which seeks to span not only different philosophies but also different disciplines. Given the high degree of interdisciplinarity within existentialism even purely technically understood, one can anticipate the notion of 'unit-idea' will prove a powerful one to employ.[30] The unit-idea that links Leopardi and the existentialists is 'existence precedes essence' – an idea which determines Leopardi's and the existentialists' philosophy, poetics, and beliefs in virtually all intellectual domains. This will emerge more clearly throughout the thesis.

This first level of the methodology is applied to the comparison between Leopardi and Kierkegaard, who is interestingly similar and relevantly different from Leopardi. Kierkegaard has often been compared to Leopardi because of shared themes such as anguish, boredom, and despair (Giampiccoli 1940; Luporini 1996; 217; Celada Ballanti 1998, 385 et al.).[31] It seems however plausible to think that the name of Giacomo Leopardi did not remain entirely unknown to Kierkegaard, as his personal library contained the second edition of Schopenhauer's *World as Will and Representation* (1844).[32] The 1844 edition is the first one to feature supplements, including the famous supplement to chapter 46 (*On the Nothingness and Suffering of Life*), where Leopardi is mentioned:

[30] Examples of existentialism's interdisciplinarity are given in the next section.
[31] I expand on these themes in Chapter 1 section 3. Kierkegaard is important for this project well beyond these themes, as will emerge in due course.
[32] A. Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, vols. 1-2, 2nd revised and enlarged edition, Leipzig: F.A. Brockhaus 1844 (Nun, Schreiber, and Stewart 2016, § 773-773a). All the supplements appear for the first time in the second edition (1844) of Schopenhauer's masterpiece. Schopenhauer read Leopardi's *Operette morali* (in the original), *Pensieri*, and *Canti*, and possibly even some of his *Letters* (Folin 2001, 143).

> Still, nobody has treated the subject [*sc*. the nothingness and suffering of life] as thoroughly and exhaustively as Leopardi does today. He is completely filled and saturated with this: his theme is always to mock and lament this existence, he presents this on every page of his work, but in such a variety of forms and expressions, with such a wealth of images, that we never get tired of it, but instead find it thoroughly entertaining and exciting (Schopenhauer 2014, 603).[33]

Whether this passage prompted Kierkegaard to find out more about Leopardi we do not know. What we do know is that, apart from this passage, there are no traces of Kierkegaard's engagement with Leopardi: he does not seem to have come across any of his works and influence should thus be excluded.

All the other existentialists, more or less directly, came across Leopardi's name and works more extensively. That usually happened through the works of Nietzsche, who mentions Leopardi much more often than Schopenhauer and, differently from him, also mentions many of his texts.

5.2 Second level: diffraction – a new chapter of Leopardi's international reception

Schopenhauer's *World as Will and Representation*, and, even more so, many of Nietzsche's works are amongst the greatest 'diffractors' of Leopardi's work towards subsequent European thought, including existentialism. Here, I employ the notion of 'diffraction' after Donna Haraway (1997, 273) and Karen Barad (2007, 72), and also after its application to Italian Studies by Manuele Gragnolati (2013, 9 ff.), and to Leopardi Studies particularly by Fabio Camilletti (2013) and Martina Piperno (2018).

The metaphor of diffraction should be unpacked as follows: Leopardi's work is the light to be diffracted; the works of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Unamuno, Croce, and others

[33] Keiner jedoch hat diesen Gegenstand so gründlich und erschöpfend behandelt wie in unseren Tagen Leopardi. Er ist von demselben ganz erfüllt und durchdrungen: überall ist der Spott und Jammer dieser Existenz sein Thema; auf jeder Seite seiner Werke stellt er ihn dar, jedoch in einer solchen Mannigfaltigkeit von Formen und Wendungen, mit solchem Reichtum an Bildern, dass er nie Überdruss erweckt, vielmehr durchweg unterhaltend und erregend wirkt (Schopenhauer 1877, vol. III, 675).

are the diffractive prisms; the existentialists are the receiving ends. The identity of the diffractors varies with the identity of the receiving ends. Benedetto Croce is one of the main diffractors for Sartre, for example. Other existentialists have other diffractors. The following is a list of confirmed 'diffractors' for every existentialist:

i. Kierkegaard: the only diffractor is Schopenhauer's *World as Will and Representation*, which Kierkegaard had in his library.

ii. Dostoevsky: the likelihood that he engaged with some of Leopardi's texts directly is very high (see Costa 2024). In any case, the confirmed diffractors for Dostoevsky are Schopenhauer's *World as Will and Representation*, which was held in Dostoevsky's library in a Russian translation (Coco 2021, 66),[34] Aleksandr Herzen's *From the Other Shore* (1855), where Leopardi is presented as 'famous' and compared to the great Russian poet and writer Mikhail Lermontov (1814-1841), and Ivan Turgenev's *Senilia, Poems in Prose* (1878-1882), as one of them, called 'Nature' (1879), is inspired by Leopardi's *Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese* (Balashov 1980, 65).

iii. Nietzsche read the majority of Leopardi's works except for the *Zibaldone*: further details are included in the next subsection.

iv. Unamuno, too, read the majority of Leopardi's works including passages from the *Zibaldone*: some details are given in the next subsection.

v. Italian existentialists: they all, to varying degrees, read and mentioned Leopardi. A comprehensive study of this phenomenon will be out soon.

[34] A. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Saint-Petersburg, M.M. Stasyulevitch, 1881. This channel, however, probably does not hold much significance as 1881 is the year of Dostoevsky's death.

vi. Heidegger: Heidegger read at the very least *L'infinito* (details are given in the next subsection). His main diffractors are Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Dilthey. In *Poetry and Experience* (1906), for example, Dilthey mentions Leopardi together with Hölderlin, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche (1985, 336). In 1879, Dilthey also reviewed very positively Paul Heyse's translation of Leopardi works.[35] Yet the most important medium of diffraction for Heidegger is Nietzsche's second *Untimely Meditation*, to which he dedicated a whole study (*Interpretation of Nietzsche's Second Untimely Meditation* [1938], Heidegger 2016b). By the time Heidegger was writing his major works (i.e. after 1927), there were already many German translations of Leopardi's works: the *Canti*,[36] the *Operette*,[37] the *Pensieri*,[38] the *Letters*, and even passages from the *Zibaldone*[39] were available in different versions.

vii. Camus: his diffractors are Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and his old schoolteacher Jean Grenier (1898-1971). Camus edited the critical edition of Grenier's *Le choix* (1941; see Camus 2000, 157), where Leopardi is mentioned together with Poe and Baudelaire in reference to boredom. Grenier writes that they 'have not hesitated to attribute a metaphysical significance to boredom, which would reveal that human beings are not in their proper place here, that they would be better off

[35] The review was published on *Westermanns Monatshefte*, Band 47, 1879, p. 260.
[36] Kannegießer (1837), Hamerling (1866), Brandes (1869), Heyse (1878, I), Rilke (1912, *L'infinito* and *La sera del dì di festa*), Spunda (1923), Wolde (1924). See more in Foschi and Carini 1988, 53 ff.
[37] Kannegießer (1837), [von Bülow (1872), unpublished], Heyse (1878, vol. II). See more in Veronese 2008, 339 ff.
[38] Some of the *Pensieri* and some *Letters* were included in Heyse's translation (1878, vol. II). The first complete collection of the *Pensieri* was published in 1922 in Leipzig for Insel Verlag: translation by Gustav Gluck and Alois Trost. The second edition, 1928, was reviewed by Walter Benjamin on 18th May 1928 on *Literarische Welt* (see Benjamin 1979, 69-71).
[39] Ludwig Wolde translated passages from the *Zibaldone* (*Gedanken aus dem Zibaldone*) as part of Leopardi's *Ausgewahlte Werke* (Leipzig, 1924). Wolde's anthology also includes excerpts from the *Operette* (Ger. *Dialoge*). The text was published again in Munich in 1943. Enrico Brissa points out that 'durante tutto il suo lavoro di critico e di scrittore il Vossler ebbe ben presente lo *Zibaldone*' (Brissa 1990, 173). Vossler, however, dismisses the *Zibaldone* together with the *Operette* arguing that, in those two works, 'non è risoluto alcun vero problema del pensiero umano' (Vossler 1916, 16).

"anywhere out of the world"' (Grenier 1941, 51. My transl.).[40] This is what Heidegger called 'thrownness' and is clearly closely related to Camus' notion of the absurd. In 1923, Grenier wrote an article titled 'Leopardi' for *Le Floréal*, where he tells the story of Leopardi's life and explains the significance of his works.[41]

viii. Beauvoir read Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, like Sartre, quite early in her career (Demoulin 2020). Beauvoir, Camus, and Sartre all mention Unamuno but no source confirms a direct reading. Nietzsche's diffraction on Beauvoir has produced a remarkable quotation from Leopardi, which is analysed in the next subsection.

ix. Sartre: besides Schopenhauer,[42] Nietzsche,[43] and probably Unamuno,[44] the most important diffractors for Sartre are Vladimir Jankélévitch, René Lalou, and Benedetto Croce. In the July 1913 issue of *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger* (pp. 655-58), which Sartre read (Dassonneville 2018, 283), Jankélévitch reviews *L'espèce et son serviteur* by André Cresson, whom Sartre also read (Dassonneville 2018, 260, 298). In his review, Jankélévitch mentions a famous late passage from the *Zibaldone*, in French:

> L'homme (et de même les autres animaux) ne naît pas pour jouir de la vie, mais seulement pour perpétuer la vie, pour ta communiquer à d'autres qui lui succèdent, pour la conserver. Ni lui, ni la vie, ni aucun objet de ce moment, n'est proprement pour lui ; et lui, au contraire, est tout entier pour la vie. Épouvantable, mais vraie proposition et conclusion de toute métaphysique. L'existence n'est pas pour l'existant, n'a pas pour fin l'existant, ni le bien de l'existant ; même s'il y éprouve quelque bien, c'est un pur hasard

[40] 'n'ont pas craint d'attribuer une signification métaphysique à l'ennui qui révélerait que l'homme n'est pas ici à sa place, qu'il serait mieux "anywhere out of the world"' (Grenier 1941, 51).
[41] Jean Grenier, 'Leopardi.' *Le Floréal*, July 1923, 434 ff.
[42] Sartre read *The World as Will and Representation* in the German 1877 edition (Demoulin 2020).
[43] Sartre read *The Birth of Tragedy*, *Human, All too Human*, *The Gay Science*, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, *The Will to Power*, *Ecce Homo*, and some of the *Posthumous Fragments* (see Louette 1996 and Demoulin 2020), most of which do mention Leopardi; yet we have no proof that he read the *Untimely Meditations*. This is highly relevant, as I will show below in treating Croce.
[44] Sartre mentions Unamuno only once in his work, and that is in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960) in reference to Unamuno's notion of the tragic sense of life (Sartre 1985, vol. I, 29).

; l'existant est pour l'existence, tout pour l'existence ; c'est là sa seule fin réelle (*Zib*. 4169. 11 marzo 1826).[45]

Jankélévitch comments on this passage by stating that 'albeit in different terms, Schopenhauer and Hartmann did not say anything different' (1913, 657. My transl.).[46] He goes on to underline that Leopardi realises the illusory nature of anthropomorphism and natural teleologism.

René Lalou mentions and in fact glorifies Leopardi in his *Histoire de la littérature française contemporaine (1870 à nos jours)* (1923), which Sartre read in 1925 (Dassonneville 2018, 265). Lalou references the '*Poésies philosophiques*' of the twentieth century, 'bitter and rebellious, whose vigour and desperate eloquence often evoke the memory of the glorious Leopardi' (Lalou 1924, 36. My transl.).[47] It is hard to believe that Sartre could read such a passage and be perfectly content with having no idea of who Leopardi was. In this regard, in 1913, Nicolas Serban wrote:

> Every French person, even one of average education, knows at least by name the great Italian pessimist. The translations of Leopardi's works outnumber those of other Italian authors. Moreover, Leopardi is the only writer of his time who still, today, arouses the zeal of translators. Finally, one may say that, alone among nineteenth-century Italian writers, he has exerted a real influence on French thought (Serban 1913, 394. My transl.).[48]

In the same work, *Leopardi et la France*, Serban also quotes extensively from the *Zibaldone*: these quotations are remarkable, as they were given only thirteen years after the publication of the *Zibaldone* in Italy.

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[45] The *Zibaldone* is always cited, as is customary, by Leopardi's original pages and dates. I, in particular, cite from the Damiani edition (Leopardi 1997b).

[46] 'dans des termes différents, Schopenhauer et Hartmann n'ont pas dit autre chose' (1913, 657).

[47] 'amères et révoltées, dont la vigueur et l'éloquence désespérée évoquement souvent le souvenir du glorieux Leopardi' (Lalou 1924, 36).

[48] Tout Français, même de culture moyenne, connaît au moins de nom le grand pessimiste italien. Les traductions des œuvres de Leopardi dépassent en nombre les traductions des autres auteurs italiens. Bien plus, Leopardi est le seul auteur de son époque qui, de nos jours, tente encore le zèle des traducteurs. Enfin, l'on peut dire que, seul d'entre les écrivains italiens du xix^{e} siècle, il a exercé une influence réelle sur la pensée française (Serban 1913, 394)

The most important diffractor for Sartre, however, is Benedetto Croce. Sartre read Croce in French in 1926 and 1927 (Dassonneville 2018, 270-71, 282), particularly the following works: *Materialismo storico ed economia marxistica. Saggi critici* (1900) and *Ciò che è vivo e ciò che è morto della filosofia di Hegel* (1907), where Leopardi is not mentioned; and *Filosofia della pratica. Economica ed etica* (1909) and *Breviario di estetica* (1913), where Leopardi is mentioned many times. In *Filosofia della pratica*,[49] Croce mentions *Il risorgimento* (Croce 1911, 137), *Bruto minore* (lines 16-19), *Paralipomeni della Batracomiomachia* for the rebirth of illusions (V, 47),[50] and explains the core thesis of the *Dialogo di un venditore di almanacchi e di un passeggere*, which might have also influenced Nietzsche according to Galimberti (in Nietzsche 1992, 125). Croce summarises the *operetta* as follows, not missing the chance to criticise it: 'nessuno vorrebbe ripercorrere la sua vita, non perché (come quel dialogo suggerisce) i dolori superino sempre i piaceri' (Croce 1915, 270).[51] Leopardi is also mentioned for the heavy influence of sensistic thought on his philosophy (Croce 1911, 261). All these instances, however, are used to criticise Leopardi's philosophy, and ultimately to deny it the very status of philosophy – a line Vossler also adopted. The two, after all, by their own admission, shared the same thought in regard to Leopardi's work (Croce and Vossler 1991, letter CCXVI, 10 May 1922). The same attitude is to be found in Croce's *Breviario di estetica* (1913), which Sartre read in 1926 (Dassonneville 2018, 270).[52] The *Canti* are praised, mentioning 'l'infinita vanità del tutto' (*A se*

[49] Benedetto Croce, *Philosophie de la pratique: économie et éthique*, traduit de l'italien par Henri Buriot et le Dr Jankélévitch, Paris, Alcan, 1911.
[50] See Croce 1911, 198-99.
[51] 'personne ne voudrait revivre sa vie, […] parce que, ainsi que le suggère ce dialogue, les douleurs dépassent toujours les plaisirs' (Croce 1911, 241).
[52] Benedetto Croce, *Bréviaire d'esthétique*, traduction de Georges Bourgin, Paris, Payot, 1923.

stesso, l. 16 in Croce 1923a, 34) and Leopardi is compared to Goethe as a great artist of modernity (Croce 1923a, 178), but he does not receive any philosophical recognition as *Poesia e non poesia* will clarify a few years later (1916). Finally, Croce also mentions a note from the *Zibaldone*, albeit not cited as such, where Leopardi praises the ability of the ancient poets to imitate nature (*Zib*. 100).

One last remark on the diffraction of Leopardi's works. The Italian cellist and composer Gaetano Braga (1829-1907) set *L'infinito* to music and played it multiple times in Paris after 1862 (Di Leonardo in a private email to the author). *L'infinito* was part of the album *Six mélodies*, which included texts by Alfred de Musset (who also wrote on Leopardi) and Victor Hugo (see Di Leonardo 2022, 14 ff.). Braga was friends with the most prominent musicians of his time, including Gioacchino Rossini, Georges Bizet, Franz Liszt, Camille Saint-Saëns, Claude Debussy, and some of the most prominent writers and poets, including Théophile Gautier, Alexandre Dumas fils, Charles Baudelaire, and Jules Amédée Barbey d'Aurevilly. D'Aurevilly was critical of Leopardi because of his 'pessimism' and discussed him with Braga (see more in Di Leonardo 2022). This, clearly, proves nothing in relation to existentialism, but it is an original and beautiful example of how rich and diverse Leopardi's diffraction was in Europe, and in France especially.

5.3 Third level: direct reading – a second new chapter of Leopardi's international reception

It is perfectly possible that every existentialist mentioned so far read Leopardi directly. Most of the time, however, that is very difficult to ascertain, mainly because the personal libraries of many existentialists are lost, and the few catalogues we have of their readings

are partial, and probably irredeemably so.[53] The existentialists who can demonstrably be shown to have read at least some of Leopardi's texts directly are Nietzsche, Unamuno, and Heidegger. An important note must also be made regarding Beauvoir.

As for Nietzsche, I can only refer the reader to the work of Cesare Galimberti (see Nietzsche 1992), who listed and analysed all the passages where Nietzsche mentions Leopardi. The same was done by María de las Nieves Muñiz Muñiz for Unamuno (in Muñiz Muñiz 2013). In brief, Nietzsche read Leopardi's *Canti* in Robert Hamerling's German translation (1866 using F45, see Veronese 2008, 336)[54] and *Operette morali* in the original Italian in Ranieri Florentine edition of 1845 (see Galimberti in Nietzsche 1992, 27). Unamuno read Leopardi's *Canti* and *Operette morali*, translated *La ginestra*, and wrote an article about Leopardi (see more in Muñiz Muñiz 2013). On top of this precious work, I would like to mention a few recent discoveries of mine, too.

In 1929, for his sixtieth birthday, Heidegger received an essay dedicated to him from Walter Otto – *Time and Being* (*Die Zeit und das Sein*). The text opens with *L'infinito* in Italian and German.[55] Otto comments on Leopardi's poem largely, also mentioning *Il sabato del villaggio*. But perhaps most importantly, Heidegger mentions Leopardi as a crucial author for the correct understanding of Nietzsche:

> *Nietzsche*. – The calculation of the influences on Nietzsche's thinking according to the contemporary and earlier philosophical erudition is merely something incidental – busy work for the scholarly news service. Essential for knowing Nietzsche historically – not historiologically – is familiarity with the unexpressed and thus all the more proffered transformation of Hölderlin, Leopardi, and Stendhal. […]

[53] As is the case for Sartre, much of Heidegger's personal library has been lost, mainly in the form of gifts to friends. However, the librarians in charge of the remaining archives confirm that it is not unlikely at all that Sartre and Heidegger did in fact possess books by Leopardi in their personal library (private emails to the author).

[54] Robert Hamerling, *Gedichte von Giacomo Leopardi verdeutscht in den Versmassen des Originals* (Hildburghausen: Verlag des Bibliographischen Instituts, 1866).

[55] This text was first noted by Caracciolo (1994, 20). Otto's text is part of *Anteile, Martin Heidegger zum 60*. Geburstag, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main, 1950, pp. 7-28. The essay was then also included in the volume *Die Gestalt und das Sein*. *Gesammelte Abhandlungen über den Mythos und seine Bedeutung für die Menschheit*, Eugen Diederichs Verlag. Dusseldorf-Koln, 1955, pp. 2-23.

> Historiologists of philosophy and journeymen on the 'newspapers' have, fortunately, no ears for such discussion; all the more cleverly do they know how to awaken 'interest' in gossip and thereby at the same time produce the appearance of a 'human' explanation of the thinking of this thinker. And what does one not give up today, if only something 'human' is brought closer (Heidegger [1937-38] 2016a, 340).[56]

The German distinction between *geschichtlich* and *historisch* – also prominent in Gadamer – differentiates between history as a meaningful, transformative process (*geschichtlich*), and history as a sequence of factual events (*historisch*). If we take Heidegger's words seriously, we must accept one of these two conclusions: either he did not know Nietzsche historically, or he was familiar with Leopardi.

Nietzsche's diffraction on Beauvoir, too, has produced something very noteworthy: it has inspired Beauvoir to quote *A se stesso* as epigraph to the third volume of her *Cahiers de jeunesse*. The quotation is in all likelihood taken from a French version of Nietzsche's second *Untimely Meditation* (cf. Beauvoir 2008, 218). The quoted lines are 7-11: 'Non val cosa nessuna / I moti tuoi, nè di sospiri è degna / La terra. Amaro e noia / La vita, altro mai nulla; e fango è il mondo. / T'acqueta omai'. In Beauvoir's text, Leopardi's poem is translated as follows: 'Rien ne vit qui soit digne / De tes élans et la terre ne mérite pas un soupir. / Douleur et l'ennui, voilà notre être et le monde est / boue – point autre chose. / Calme-toi' (Beauvoir 2008, 217, 7 décembre 1926). Not only are these the exact same lines Nietzsche quoted in the second *Untimely Meditation* (1873 in Nietzsche 1997), but they appear exactly the same in the 1907 French edition of the *Untimely Meditations*, where the translator Henri Albert follows Nietzsche's variant on Leopardi's text, rather

[56] *Nietzsche.* – Die Verrechnung der Einflüsse der zeitgenössischen und früheren Philosophiegelehrsamkeit auf Nietzsches Denken ist nur ein Beiläufiges – eine Beschäftigung für den wissenschaftlichen Nachrichtendienst. Wesentlich für seine geschichtliche – nicht historische – Erkenntnis ist das Wissen von der unausgesprochenen und deshalb ums vorhandenen Verwandlung von Hölderlin, Leopardi und Stendhal. […]
Für diese Gespräche haben die Philosophiehistoriker und Zunftmeister der 'Zeitungen' zum Glück keine Ohren; umso eifriger wissen sie für allen Klatsch das 'Interesse' zu wecken und damit zugleich den Anschein einer 'menschlichen' Erklärung des Denkens dieses Denkers. Und was gibt man heute nicht alles darum, wenn nur Jegliches 'menschliche' näher gebracht ist (Heidegger 2014, 469).

than checking Hamerling's German translation (let alone the original Italian). The marker of Nietzsche's hand is the replacement of Hamerling's original 'amara noia' (*bittere Langeweile*) with 'dolore e noia' (*Schmerz und Langeweile*). Albert follows Nietzsche and translates 'Schmerz' with 'douleur'. Beauvoir also comments on Leopardi's lines:

> I am no longer asking for life to enrich me, but only to be able to live. Ah! Leopardi's very fine words that I am writing to head this notebook are exactly what I was seeking, the expression of what I have felt for so long, and to compare to the ardent words that I gathered last year: you live, be innumerable, etc. (Beauvoir 2006, vol. III, 74. 9th January 1927).[57]

This is a remarkable example of Nietzsche's 'diffraction' of Leopardi's thought towards all subsequent thinkers, including the existentialists.

5.4 Answer to a possible objection

Towards 'Leopardi's existentialism' one might raise the objection that this reading suffers from a 'teleological bias', meaning that Leopardi's philosophy is defined as a form of existentialism only *a posteriori* – that is, only in virtue of the fact that there has been such a thing as existentialism after Leopardi – and that, in doing so, this reading ends up denaturing its subject. This objection is important, as it calls for a further clarification of the thesis of this project. The line of argument in this objection is correct in its premise but wrong in its conclusion. It is true that my reading defines Leopardi as an 'existentialist' only because there has in fact been such a movement as existentialism afterwards (premise); yet this definition does not denature Leopardi (conclusion); but rather it allows to see his thought in a new light, realising possibilities – 'virtuals' – that

[57] Je ne demande plus que la vie m'enrichisse, mais que je puisse vivre seulement. Les mots si beaux de Leopardi que j'écris en tête de ce cahier, ah ! c'est cela exactement que je cherchais, l'expression de ce que je sentais depuis si longtemps, et de comparer aux mots ardents que je recueillais l'an dernier : tu vis, sois innombrable, etc. (Beauvoir 2008, 263, 9 janvier 1927).

would otherwise remain latent. This is the outcome of the first level of analysis outlined above. The other two levels provide a solid basis for the hypothesis that Leopardi, more or less directly, influenced the existentialists, making the worry of teleologism fade away. Besides, the same objection could be raised with regard to Kierkegaard: he was Leopardi's contemporary and never spoke of 'existentialism'. And yet his thought has also been interpreted *a posteriori* as 'existentialist', so much so that he has been made the very 'father' of existentialism. The initial objector might now respond that the existentialists themselves mention Kierkegaard in their works, to which I would in turn respond that the existentialists themselves, according to the terms of the objection, end up denaturing Kierkegaard's thought because he never spoke of existentialism. Ultimately, one can either see a denaturation (of both Leopardi and Kierkegaard) or a new reading (of both Leopardi and Kierkegaard) that gave birth to a new philosophical and literary movement.[58]

5.5 How is Leopardi's absence to be accounted for?

A question might now arise: why did nobody recognise the importance of Leopardi in the creation of existentialism earlier?

Indeed, except during the decades immediately following his death, Leopardi's presence in European culture was destined to be an underground one, especially in relation to his philosophical importance. This, in all likelihood, happened for two main reasons. The first and most obvious one is that the *Zibaldone* was published more than sixty years after Leopardi's death, so that not even Nietzsche could read any part of it;

[58] This, clearly, is not the only possible objection one might raise towards my thesis. Many more possible objections are addressed in the relevant sections of the work.

and, as will emerge below, it is in the *Zibaldone* that Leopardi's 'existentialism' takes shape most distinctly. Yet even after its publication, it remained an Italian matter.[59] Even when Leopardi is indeed present in subsequent works, more often than not he is not explicitly mentioned. Nietzsche's references to Leopardi, for example, are by no means always overt – which is why Galimberti's work is so invaluable.

The second reason is less obvious yet widely defensible (see also Cori 2019, 28): from the very beginning of his reception, Leopardi has been presented through loaded and often deleterious narratives that betrayed the depth and originality of his work. Francesco de Sanctis, in his otherwise noteworthy essay *Schopenhauer e Leopardi* ([1858] 1992), arguably insisted too much on Leopardi's 'pessimism' – a label that has weighed heavily and negatively on his reputation. Following in the footsteps of De Sanctis, his student Benedetto Croce cast great discredit on Leopardi's work, arguing that most of his poetry does not deserve that name, and that none of his philosophy can properly be called such (Croce 1923b, 103 ff.). Another unhelpful framing is 'Leopardi as a German Romantic poet', promoted by Robert Hamerling, who translated the *Canti* for into German the first time in 1866 (Polidori 1999, 269), in the edition used by Nietzsche. The French translations of the *Canti* and the critical essay *Portrait de Leopardi* by Charles Augustin de Sainte-Beuve (1844) also helped to spread the image of Leopardi now as a 'nationalist' poet, now as a 'sentimental' one (see Bellucci 1996). Something very similar happened in the Russian reception, which likely weighed heavily on the picture someone like Dostoevsky could form of Leopardi (see Costa 2024). Coming to more recent years, the scholarship has emphasised the influence of rationalist and scientific thought on Leopardi, and rightly so (see above all Polizzi 2003 and Bodei 2022), but this has often resulted in

[59] The French (2004), English (2013), and German (in progress) translations of the *Zibaldone* came too late to be relevant for the existentialists.

an underappreciation of other sides of Leopardi's thought, such as the so-called 'theory of illusions', which is crucial for his 'existentialism'. These, mainly, have been the partial frames that have prevented readers from seeing the potentiality for an existentialist reading of Leopardi. Generally speaking, any Leopardi scholar would probably agree that all the above features are indeed present in Leopardi's work, but none of them exclusively nor – I would claim – predominantly. This study certainly highlights many of those underappreciated aspects of Leopardi's thought.

6. Philosophical literature, literary philosophy

The texts involved in this project belong to a wide range of genres: letters (Leopardi, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche); private notes (Leopardi's *Zibaldone*, Kierkegaard's and Dostoevsky's *Diary*); philosophical-anthropological essays (Leopardi's *Saggi*, Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, Camus' *Myth of Sisyphus*); plays (Sartre, Camus); novels (Dostoevsky, Sartre, Camus); philosophical proses (Leopardi's *Operette morali*, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche); poems (Leopardi's *Canti*); philosophical treatises (Leopardi's *Dissertazioni filosofiche*, Unamuno, Sartre, Heidegger); and finally, the hypertext of the *Zibaldone*, which, being much more than a collection of private notes, constitutes a class of its own. Indeed, the *Zibaldone* includes excerpts of what might have become philosophical treatises, philological essays, poems, dialogues, novels, historical works, translations, and texts of the most various kinds.[60]

Because of the intrinsic interdisciplinarity of existentialism, any project concerning it cannot but be both literary and philosophical. To try to separate philosophy and literature in these authors is precisely what should not be done, if one wishes not to denature the texts. Many scholars have highlighted Leopardi's own interdisciplinarity – among them, Tommaso Landolfi expresses it very beautifully:

> Leopardi, infine, non poeta soltanto, ma specula nel senso proprio dell'espressione; Leopardi è anche, e magari soprattutto, un filosofo. […] Questa esperienza speculativa di Leopardi essendo strettamente fusa colla artistica e letteraria, cui presta il suo organamento e le sue inflessioni, chi voglia della seconda rendersi esatto conto ed apprezzare in tutto le vaghezze, deve alla prima continuamente e necessariamente rifarsi (Landolfi 1940, 20).[61]

The same inextricability between literature and philosophy applies, for example, to Camus, who points out that 'it would be impossible to insist too much on the arbitrary

[60] See the rigorous and illuminating reconstruction of these nascent texts by Fabiana Cacciapuoti in Leopardi 2019.
[61] Landolfi was reviewing Tilgher's work *La filosofia di Leopardi* (1940).

nature of the […] opposition between art and philosophy' (1975, 93).[62] For Camus, the great novelists, such as Dostoevsky, are philosophers whose thought is expressed through images rather than concepts: for such authors, trying to distinguish between literature and philosophy is a futile enterprise. Unamuno is even more explicit on this point: 'philosophy lies closer to poetry than to science' (1972, 4); 'a poet and a philosopher are twins, or perhaps even one and the same thing' (1972, 10).[63] This notion is clearly very present in Leopardi as well, and we should not be surprised if Unamuno was inspired by him in this regard too:

> È tanto mirabile quanto vero, che la poesia la quale cerca p. sua natura e proprietà il bello, e la filosofia ch'essenzialmente ricerca il vero, cioè la cosa più contraria al bello; sieno le facoltà le più affini tra loro, tanto che il vero poeta è sommamente disposto ad essere gran filosofo, è il vero filosofo ad essere gran poeta, anzi nè l'uno nè l'altro non può essere nel genere il suo nè perfetto nè grande, s'ei non partecipa più che mediocremente dell'altro genere (*Zib*. 3382-83. 8 settembre 1823).

Thus, the epistemic enterprises of the existentialists are philosophical but in a distinctly unscientific sense: one can most properly speak of existentialism as a philosophical form of literature or a literary form of philosophy. This, clearly, is possible only on condition that thought is not reduced to mere computation or, in Leopardi's terms, that philosophy is made with 'words' rather than 'terms' (see *Zib*. 110, 1226). This is why the most famous definitions of Leopardi's intellectual enterprise remain the Heideggerian formulas of 'pensiero poetante' and 'poesia pensante' coined by Antonio Prete ([1980] 2006). This is the subject of the third chapter; for now, it suffices to say that the way Leopardi and the existentialists understand philosophy is radically different from the way analytic philosophers do. For existentialism, philosophy is a form of art; for analytic philosophy, it is almost – I dare say – a degenerate form of science. Existentialists reject the notion

[62] 'On ne saurait trop insister sur l'arbitraire de l'ancienne opposition entre art et philosophie' (Camus 1981, 131).
[63] 'la filosofía se acuesta más a la poesía que no a las ciencias' (1983, 6); 'poeta y filósofo son hermanos gemelos, si es que no la misma cosa' (1983, 11).

that ‘what can be said at all can be said clearly’ (Wittgenstein 2023, 3), which still dominates analytic philosophy. For the existentialists, there is also what can be said vaguely, and speaking vaguely is the business of poetry, which appeals to individual experiences and feelings, rather than to logic. Analytic philosophers retain a more or less latent faith in the liberating power of truth, while existentialists are convinced that knowing the truth of our human condition only brings us unhappiness. For them, the value of existence lies in the creation of the individual – the creation of values, of art – whose scientific truth or lack thereof is irrelevant, because these provide us with meaning worth living and dying for. The mystery of existence cannot be explained through logical language: indeed, it cannot be explained at all. But it is possible to offer some vague and indefinite intimations of something valuable, and this is what existentialists do. This tension finds an initial, tentative theoretical formulation in Leopardi’s notion of ‘ultrafilosofia’ (*Zib*. 115): ‘il suo tentativo o il suo sogno di ripristinare […] quello stato in cui la ragione e la filosofia non erano ancora nate’ (Rigoni 2000, 110). All of this is fully treated in third chapter.

7. This study within the existing scholarship

Linking Leopardi and existentialism is almost commonplace in the scholarship on Leopardi. With only a slight exaggeration, one can say that there is almost no Leopardi scholar who has not hinted at this connection at least once. But it is no exaggeration to say that almost every Leopardi scholar has recognised the importance of the problem of the meaning of existence for Leopardi, as well as such existential themes as boredom, finitude, and the like. These themes, however, have never been treated in more than a passing remark.

Among the critics who wrote on Leopardi's thought in any consequential way, the ones who have highlighted his 'existentialism' most prominently are the philosophers of the 1930s and 1940s, such as Giuseppe Rensi, Giovanni Amelotti, and especially Cesare Luporini and Adriano Tilgher. Italian scholarship has largely forgotten these figures today, mainly because of Benedetto Croce's enormous influence – an influence that may well have weighed on Sartre himself. At any rate, many suggestions regarding Leopardi's 'proto-existentialism', of Leopardi as a 'precursor of existentialism' and the like, are also very frequent in subsequent studies – yet, again, never developed beyond the level of suggestion.

7.1 Leopardi 'existentialist' in the scholarship pre-1947

Probably for the first time in the history of Leopardi scholarship, Giovanni Amelotti compared Leopardi's thought to Heidegger's existentialism (see Amelotti 1937, 321-330). One year later, in 1938, Cesare Luporini published his first essay on Leopardi's

thought (now collected in Luporini 1996). The essay, *Il pensiero di Leopardi*, includes the first explicit claim of Leopardi's existentialism:

> A differenza di tutti gli altri animali, aveva detto Leopardi, l'uomo non è soltanto 'disposizione ad essere', ma è 'disposizione a poter essere', e in questa differenza credo vada visto il fondamento teorico del suo esistenzialismo (nel senso moderno del termine) (Luporini [1938] 1996, 122).

This essay has been immensely important for this project, and its implications are explored in the relevant sections.[64] In 1940, Guglielmo Giampiccoli wrote an article titled *Kierkegaard e Leopardi*, in which he compared Kierkegaard's notion of anguish with Leopardi's notion of boredom (Giampiccoli 1940), as Luporini also does in *Leopardi progressivo* ([1947] 1996, 80). In the same year, Adriano Tilgher published the still highly relevant *La filosofia di Leopardi*, which is also one of the most important references for this project (Tilgher 1940). Tilgher compared Leopardi to Heidegger (1940, 157) and to irrationalist philosophies, as existentialism itself partly is (1940, 46).[65] The last important work before the so-called 'svolta del '47' in Leopardi Studies is Luporini's *Situazione e libertà nell'esistenza umana* (1942). This, notably, is not a scholarly study of Leopardi's thought but rather the most important existentialist work by Luporini, in which he expressed his own reflections on the main issues of existentialism. This work is highly relevant as Leopardi is frequently mentioned together with existentialists such as Heidegger, Jaspers, and Sartre, confirming his importance for existentialist discussions. These and the following works are especially significant as they were written and published during the peak years of existentialism.

[64] Mainly Chapter 2 section 5.
[65] This is treated in the third Chapter.

7.2 Leopardi 'existentialist' in the scholarship 1947-2000

The two seminal studies that mark the most famous turning-point in Leopardi scholarship are both favourable to the conjunction of Leopardi and existentialism. Walter Binni, in *La nuova poetica leopardiana* (1947), underlines Tilgher's merit in comparing Leopardi to Heidegger (Binni 1971, 29); and Luporini, in *Leopardi progressivo* (1947), writes more explicitly that:

> Il Leopardi anticipa […], in modo quasi stupefacente, bruciando in se stesso le tappe, quello che più tardi sarà lo svolgimento di una parte importante del pensiero europeo dal *vitalismo* all'*esistenzialismo*, e prolunga, sotto questo aspetto, la sua problematica fino ai giorni nostri (Luporini [1947] 1996, 72-73; italics in the original).

Many authors in these years refer to Leopardi as a 'precursor' of existentialism: such authors include, for example, Carmelo Nifosì (1949, 142), Antonino Tullier in his *Introduction* to the 1951 edition of Leopardi's *Pensieri* (see Leopardi 1951), and Michele Federico Sciacca (see 1964, 162; 1972, 14). In his second key work on Leopardi, *La protesta di Leopardi* (1973), Binni explicitly characterises Leopardi's philosophy as 'un nichilismo esistenzialistico profondo e ricco di modernissime anticipazioni' (Binni 1973, 85). Cesare Galimberti, too, in his commentary on the *Operette morali* (1977), notes that 'il sensismo di Leopardi, portato al limite, e dunque sostanzialmente stravolto, tende a sconfinare in un atteggiamento esistenzialistico potenzialmente religioso' (Galimberti in Leopardi 1998b, 219n28 commenting on the *Dialogo di Torquato Tasso e del suo genio familiare* and *Zib*. 532-35). Further on, commenting on the *Dialogo di Plotino e di Porfirio*, Galimberti writes even more explicitly that 'Leopardi appare su posizioni di tipo esistenzialistico *ante litteram*' (ibid., 409n80). Paolo Ruffilli is also an explicit advocate of Leopardi's existentialism. In his 1982 edition of the *Operette morali*, he claims that Leopardi explains 'prima di Kierkegaard e degli esistenzialisti, l'angoscia dell'uomo per la nullità di fronte all'infinito e, prima di Nietzsche, la forza trasfiguratrice

dell'immaginazione' (Ruffilli in Leopardi 1991, XXI). Ruffilli ultimately defines Leopardi's philosophy as 'una forma di esistenzialismo radicale' (ibid., XXIX).

Alberto Caracciolo is, together with Luporini and Tilgher, the most important reference for this project. Like Luporini, Caracciolo was both a Leopardi scholar and an existentialist philosopher, and Leopardi is not only the subject of some of his scholarly works but also an important reference for his own existentialist philosophy. Caracciolo's main work on Leopardi is the 1987 collection of essays *Leopardi e il nichilismo*, published posthumously in 1994. In these essays, Caracciolo makes Leopardi part of the philosophical genealogy of European nihilism (and existentialism), together with Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, and Camus (see Caracciolo 1994). His 'existentialist' essays not directly about Leopardi, however, are possibly even more important. Many of them have been collected in *Nichilismo ed etica* (1983), where Caracciolo writes: 'non si capisce bene perché – quando si indaghi *geschichtlich* e non puramente *historisch* – tra i "padri" dell'esistenzialismo debba necessariamente figurare Kierkegaard, e possa essere dimenticato il nome di Leopardi' (Caracciolo 1983, 79; italics in the original).[66] Caracciolo suggests that, if we understand existentialism as a philosophical movement with a meaningful historical course of actions, rather than a mere collection of authors, Leopardi must be acknowledged as one of its founders.

In his important monographic essay on Leopardi, Jean-Pierre Barricelli writes that Leopardi's posture of endurance in the face of the human condition places him 'centrally among post-Renaissance proto-existentialist thinkers from Pascal to Søren Kierkegaard

[66] It is noteworthy that Caracciolo employs the same distinction between *geschichtlich* and *historisch* Heidegger used about Leopardi and Nietzsche: it is absolutely plausible that he uses it in the wake of Heidegger, and possibly of that very passage analysed above. Caracciolo's insights are developed in Chapter 1 section 5. The essay quoted in the text is titled *Esistenzialismo, ermeneutica, nichilismo*, which was originally a paper presented at the Italian Philosophical Society Conference on 'La tradizione filosofica italiana nel Novecento: fenomenologia ed esistenzialismo' held in Tarquinia on 13th-15th October 1980.

in such a way as to make us realize how exaggerated is the prominence in the existential textbook of writers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus' (Barricelli 1986, 33). Whether or not the prominence of Sartre and Camus has indeed been exaggerated, Barricelli is certainly correct in noting Leopardi's own prominence when it comes to existentialist themes. He also correctly notes that 'the search for forerunners of post-World War II existentialism (most often mentioned have been Pascal, Søren Kierkegaard, Nikolai Gogol, and Luigi Pirandello, among others) occasionally brought forth the name of Leopardi, but nothing much developed' (1986, 194). As I noted above, the situation has hardly changed at all since 1986. The theoretical proximity between Leopardi and existentialism was also noted by the philosopher and Leopardi scholar Toni Negri. In his important study on Leopardi, *Lenta ginestra* (1987), he writes:

> l'insistenza sull'essere e sulla singolarità della coscienza, la protesta contro ogni operazione che voglia manipolare l'ordine della sensibilità e l'orizzonte etico immediato sono comportamenti teorici che accomunano le posizioni esistenzialistiche e quelle leopardiane (Negri 1987, 269).

Further on, Negri praises the work of Luporini, who 'giustamente confronta il pensiero di Leopardi e quello di certo esistenzialismo ottocentesco, in particolare Kierkegaard' (Negri 1987, 401n44). At the same time, Negri is aware of the considerable differences between Leopardi and Kierkegaard:

> Eppure, al di là di questa protesta, che radicale differenza! Tanto più evidente quanto più si perviene ad analizzare il pensiero leopardiano e quello kierkegaardiano sui nuclei forti del loro rassomigliare: sono entrambi pensieri ontologici, a forte pregnanza metafisica, ma l'uno è spirituale e spinge la critica della trascendentalità verso il trascendente, l'altro è rigorosamente materialistico. La singolarità si chiama grazia in Kierkegaard e caso in Leopardi. E ancora potremmo continuare… (Negri 1987, 269).[67]

Further important references include Sergio Solmi (1987, 62, 96), Elio Gioanola (1995, 235, 254), Riccardo Scrivano (1998, 367), and Maria Grazia Poddighe, who notes that: 'possiamo leggere il percorso leopardiano verso la disperazione esistenziale attraverso il

[67] To the large differences between Leopardi and Kierkegaard I dedicated section 8 of Chapter 3.

tema tutto novecentesco della "Ek-sistenz" di Heidegger, fino ai postulati esistenzialisti di Sartre' (1998, 11). Emanuele Severino must also be included in this account, for having drawn deep and important connections mainly with Nietzsche and Heidegger, even if more relevant to nihilism than to existentialism (see Severino 1990; 1997; 2015).

7.3 Leopardi 'existentialist' in the scholarship post-2000

Within the last twenty-five years, the scholarship has continued to stress the connections between Leopardi and existentialism. Frank Rosengarten (2012, XII) and Raoul Bruni (2014, 90, 99) have certainly done so, but perhaps more than anyone else recently, Luigi Capitano. In his important monograph *Leopardi. L'alba del nichilismo* (2016), he writes: 'Leopardi precorre quel primato dell'esistenza […] su ogni concetto astratto che diventerà programmatico dell'esistenzialismo novecentesco' (2016, 545). This theoretical move Capitano reads as nihilist, but I will show that it must first be regarded as existentialist by its very definition.[68]

The above was merely an overview of the scholars who have drawn more or less explicit connections between Leopardi and existentialism; yet the list of authors who have written on Leopardi in relation to individual existentialists – such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, or Camus – is much longer.[69]

[68] See Chapter 1 section 5.
[69] Rather than attempting the impossible task of mentioning all the relevant works, I will refer the reader to Capitano 2016, which, besides its hermeneutic value, is also an invaluable bibliographic tool. See especially the section *La controversia ermeneutica* (Capitano 2016, 839-916).

7.4 The critics of Leopardi's existentialism

There are also a few important scholars who are more critical of linking Leopardi to existentialism. Most explicitly Anna Dolfi, who rejects Luporini's perspective, even though more for the irrationalist reading than the existentialist one (Dolfi 1973, 5-6). According to Dolfi, Leopardi operates 'un rifiuto totale di ogni forma di irrazionalismo, nel recupero che la ragione fa di se stessa attraverso la propria forza di negazione' (ibid.). Dolfi proposes a connection with the Frankfurt School instead:

> La filosofia negativa, quale è portata avanti da pensatori come Adorno, Horkheimer, Bloch, Marcuse, Benjamin… mi sembra presenti invece notevoli caratteri di affinità col pensiero leopardiano. La ragione negativa serve a loro, come a Leopardi, per sconfiggere sia la falsa razionalità che l'irrazionalità, per riapprodare ad un illuminismo che, salvato dalla degenerazione, possa tendere ad un futuro diverso (Dolfi 1973, 6n25).

Sebastiano Timpanaro also denies that Leopardi's pessimism can be juxtaposed with the romantic-existentialist one (1982, 151-53), but he also rejects the connection drawn by Anna Dolfi with the Frankfurt School. Finally, we have the somewhat ambivalent stance adopted by David Jérôme, who defines Leopardi's philosophy 'une philosophie de l'existence' and holds that 'l'existence précède toujours l'essence chez Leopardi' (Jérôme 2021, 166), and yet denies that Leopardi's thought is 'une préfiguration de l'existentialisme sartrien' (2021, 253). Jérôme has, however, the undeniable merit of formulating clear objections, which I address in the relevant sections of the work.[70] To conclude, one should note that:

a. no scholar has found any traces of Leopardi's direct influence on the existentialists, apart from Nietzsche (see especially Galimberti in Nietzsche 1992) and Unamuno (see especially Muñiz Muñiz 2013), despite the strong interest of Italian scholarship for these kinds of hermeneutic enterprises; and that

[70] See Chapter 1 section 9 and Chapter 2 section 7.

b. no scholar has examined the ‘similarities’ between Leopardi and the existentialists for more than a few lines.

This project advances on both fronts, uncovering traces of Leopardi’s direct and indirect influence on existentialism and greatly expanding upon the similarities and connections between Leopardi and the existentialists, to the point of making Leopardi the first atheist existentialist. This calls for a new account of the genealogy of existentialism, which is what this project ultimately was born to accomplish.

1. *Giacomo Leopardi and the Foundation of Existentialism*

Abstract

Giacomo Leopardi formulates what can be considered the foundational principle of existentialism: 'existence precedes essence'. Leopardi's whole philosophy is based on the 'existentialist' principle, from which Leopardi's ontology, ethics, and aesthetics can be derived as direct consequences, rejecting Platonic ideas and metaphysical necessity. Leopardi's vision of existence as absurd and meaningless is also a consequence of his 'existentialism', and aligns him with atheist existentialists, especially Sartre and Camus. The absurdity of existence takes many forms, including boredom, nausea, anguish, and despair, also philosophically and poetically pioneered by Leopardi. The established genealogy of existentialism should be challenged, and Leopardi should be recognised, together with Kierkegaard, as the movement's founder.

> the greatest spiritual insights seem to derive from the testimonies of those who stand teetering in the dark.
>
> (Cormac McCarthy, *Stella Maris*)

1. The absurdity of existence

We are 'thrown' into this absurd existence without appeal. This is Heidegger's and Camus' thought, also expressed in the Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese.

> La maggior parte degli uomini vive per abito […]. Se riflettessero, astraendo dalla religione, non troverebbero motivo di vivere, e […] conchiuderebbero che la vita loro è un assurdo, perché l'aver cominciato a vivere, secondo natura sibbene, ma secondo ragione non è motivo giusto di continuare (*Zib*. 273. 14 ottobre 1820).

The year 1819 marks the major shift in Leopardi's philosophical life: it is the time of his 'conversione filosofica', which led him to shift his focus from beauty to truth (*Zib*. 144. 1 luglio 1820. See also D'Intino 2009b, 88). After this moment, the absurdity of existence becomes an indisputable fact for him. Before 1819 he used the word 'assurdo' in its conventional sense of 'incredible' or 'logically impossible'; in 1819 the term evolves to denote 'existential meaninglessness'. The use of 'assurdo' as a noun, perhaps surprising, is actually documented in the *Dizionario della lingua italiana* edited by Paolo Costa and Francesco Cardinali (1819-1826, s.v. 'assurdo'). This word, however, is usually confined to the context of logic, whereas Leopardi uses it to define existence, in the way that is typical of existentialism: existence is devoid of any intrinsic meaning. The only possible source of meaning is, for Leopardi, religion, which alone can give substance to illusions (*Zib*. 411. 9-15 dicembre 1820). Thus, modern humanity, trapped in its hyper-rationality, faces the following dilemma: 'o il sistema della natura e delle cose è totalmente assurdo e contraddittorio, o bisogna necessariamente ammettere una Religione' (*Zib*. 364. 1° dicembre 1820). But religion is not Leopardi's solution (see Chapter 2, section 8):

therefore, the 'system of nature' is 'totalmente assurdo e contraddittorio'.[71] This reasoning appears early in Leopardi's career but was never retracted.

Leopardi's poetry, too, is full of this absurdity. In the *Inno ai patriarchi*, the human being 'nasce al pianto' (line 7); in the *Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia*, all human enterprises are destined to end in an 'abisso orrido, immenso' (l. 35).[72] *Il Risorgimento* expresses the absurd in its etymological sense (*ab-surdus*, 'deaf'): 'So che natura è sorda, / Che miserar non sa. / Che non del ben sollecita / Fu, ma dell'esser solo' (lines 119-22). Leopardi points out that being in itself is insufficient for the happiness of humans: they need meaning, and they demand it. But nature is deaf. This etymology underscores the relational nature of the absurd, which arises from the clash between human reason and a silent universe. In the *Zibaldone*, Leopardi notes: 'l'assurdo si misura dalla dissonanza [*sc*. del mondo] col nostro modo di ragionare' (*Zib*. 1470. 8 agosto 1821). This is also how Camus defines the absurd in *The Myth of Sisyphus*: 'the absurd is the confrontation of the irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart' (1975, 26).[73] Everyone is familiar with the image of Sisyphus pointlessly pushing his rock up and down the hill. Given the conception of absurdity it embodies, it is no coincidence that a remarkably similar image is to be found in the *Zibaldone*: 'l'oggetto reale della vita è […] lo strascinare con gran fatica su e giù per una medesima strada un carro pesantissimo e vôto' (*Zib*. 1476. 10 agosto 1821). Leopardi shares with the existentialists the idea that the human condition is irredeemably absurd. This

[71] Leopardi uses the phrase 'system of nature' after D'Holbach (1999) but characterising it absurd is his own idea. On the relationship between Leopardi and D'Holbach, see Timpanaro 1969, 145 ff.; Pelosi 1992, ch. IX; Capra 2016; and Capitano 2020.
[72] I will cite *Canti* by their title and relevant lines from Leopardi 2016.
[73] 'L'absurde naît de cette confrontation entre l'appel humain et le silence déraisonnable du monde' (Camus 1981, 46).

condition, however, is not passively accepted: every thought and piece of writing by Leopardi and 20th-century existentialists is an attempt to escape it.

1.1 The *Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese* through the lens of the absurd

Leopardi's absurd has been compared to Camus' before (see Jonard 1974 and Capitano 2016, 606 ff.), but many of its implications remain largely under-explored. The *Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese* is certainly among the two or three texts in which Leopardi gives voice to the absurdity of existence most profoundly. This *operetta* belongs to those where a human voice speaks with a non-human voice, in Mike Caesar's illuminating classification of the *Operette* (see Caesar 1988, 28 ff.). The opening words of Nature – 'Chi sei? che cerchi?' (Leopardi 2008, 274) – are not just introductory remarks; they are also existential questions.[74] These questions mirror the existential interrogation of the *Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia*: Nature's 'Chi sei?' parallels the 'Ed io che sono?' of the *Canto notturno* (l. 89); 'Che cerchi?' parallels 'ove tende / Questo vagar mio breve, / Il tuo corso immortale?' (ll. 18-20), meaning 'where am I going?'. The Icelander's reply – 'sono un povero Islandese, che vo fuggendo la Natura' (274) – conceals a deeper truth. His real answer, which emerges throughout the text, is: 'I don't know who I am, and I don't know where I'm going'. He does, however, know what he is looking for: true happiness, that is, infinite pleasure. This is the absurd: knowing what we are looking for and having no chance of finding it. Infinite pleasure does not exist, as the theory of pleasure clearly declares (*Zib*. 165 ff.). The Icelander asks Nature *why* this is the case: he is searching for meaning. He points out that, rather than infinite pleasure, pain is everywhere: 'alcune volte mi è bisognato fuggire a tutta lena dai fiumi, che

[74] Hereinafter the *Operette morali* will be cited in the text by their title; the page refers to Leopardi 2008.

m'inseguivano, come fossi colpevole verso loro di qualche ingiuria. Molte bestie salvatiche, non provocate da me con una menoma offesa, mi hanno voluto divorare' (277). The Icelander makes the mistake of attributing will and intentions to animals and natural elements. Yet he does so in order to rescue some meaningful narrative, even if only of the kind 'if you offend me, I will offend you'. Finally, he makes the still greater mistake of attributing will to Nature itself: 'io soglio prendere non piccola ammirazione considerando come tu ci abbi infuso tanta e sì ferma e insaziabile avidità del piacere; […] e da altra parte abbi ordinato che l'uso di esso piacere sia quasi di tutte le cose umane la più nociva' (277). What the Icelander does not understand is that Nature neither infused nor ordered anything. Nobody infused the desire for the infinite in us: it is nobody's plan.[75] The human condition is inexplicable. And even when the Icelander says: 'mi avveggo che tanto ci è destinato e necessario il patire, quanto il non godere' (278), he is still mistaken, because he is still thinking teleologically: he says 'ci è destinato', but there is no destiny. Nature replies: 'sempre ebbi ed ho l'intenzione a tutt'altro, che alla felicità degli uomini o all'infelicità' (279). Nature has in fact no intentions whatsoever – thinking in terms of 'will' and 'intentions' is still a human, all too human way of thinking about universal existence. A few years later, a note in the *Zibaldone* makes this clear:

> quando io dico: la natura ha voluto, non ha voluto, ha avuto intenzione ec., intendo p. natura quella qualunq. sia intelligenza o forza o necessità o fortuna, che ha conformato l'occhio a vedere, l'orecchio a udire; che ha coordinati gli effetti alle cause finali parziali che nel mondo sono evidenti (*Zib*. 4413. 20 ottobre 1828).

Yet this 'intelligenza o forza o necessità o fortuna' is arguably closer to chance rather than to any sentient and willing entity: as Negri puts it, 'la singolarità si chiama grazia in

[75] I do not find Leopardi's solution that 'our desire for the infinite comes from nowhere' satisfying. Other existentialists, such as Kierkegaard, provide more sound solutions (it comes from an infinite Being). They then run into the logical difficulty, however, of dealing philosophically with God's existence, which is just as great a problem as the initial one. In any case, these considerations fall definitely beyond the scope and intentions of the essay.

Kierkegaard e caso in Leopardi' (1987, 269). The passage from a meaningful will to absurd chance is made explicit in *La ginestra* (1836), where the broom is where it is 'non per voler, ma per fortuna' (l. 313). Nature's real answer comes later in the text: 'tu mostri non aver posto mente che la vita di quest'universo è un perpetuo circuito di produzione e distruzione' (280). Nature has no intentions, neither towards nor against human happiness. If Nature did in fact wish to punish us for some reason, that, however harsh, would still be part of some kind of meaningful narrative: there has been guilt; Nature is punishing us for that guilt; therefore, when the punishment will have been inflicted, we can expect to attain a state of happiness. This is, after all, the meaningful narrative of Christianity, which Leopardi does reject as false, but which he also ardently desires as beautiful – falsity and beauty always co-occur in Leopardi's thought, as in Nietzsche's. When Nature warns the Icelander that he is failing to understand that 'life is a perpetual cycle of production and destruction' (Leopardi 1982a, 199), what she is saying is: 'I don't communicate with you', 'we speak different languages'. Indeed, the Icelander alone speaks a language, in the sense that he asks for meaning; Nature does not speak any meaningful or understandable language, or she only does so in the literary work. In reality, she is deaf, mute, and absurd.

The Icelander laments that nobody can satisfactorily answer his question: 'a chi piace o a chi giova cotesta vita infelicissima dell'universo?' (280). Yet nobody can answer that because there is no rational answer; or, in other words, the only answer is that existence is absurd. Noticeably absurd is also the close of the dialogue: the life of the Icelander is worth a single day of the lives of two lions that happen to pass by. Even more ironically, Leopardi makes himself appear unsure of how the Icelander died – was he eaten by the two lions, or was it a sandstorm that killed him? He cannot even remember. The point is, the Icelander is dead, one way or another – who cares? There was no meaning in his life,

as there is none in his death. A tragic close indeed, which, for Leopardi, epitomises the close of our own existence.

The absurdity of existence is also sometimes referred to as the 'nothingness' of existence, by both Leopardi and the existentialists. The absurd is thus sometimes conceived of as a nothingness – a lack of meaning. Yet the notion of nothingness has a much longer history than the one of the absurd, a history that also translates into a wider significance.

2. The notion of nothingness and its linguistic-philosophical background

2.1 The philosophical definition

Let us start by clarifying what Leopardi and the existentialists mean by 'nothingness'. For the definitions of the key terms of existentialism, I will be employing Nicola Abbagnano's *Dizionario di filosofia* (1971), which is one of the best possible sources where the Italian context and existentialism are concerned. Abbagnano was a preeminent historian of philosophy with expertise in the Italian tradition and one of the leading figures in Italian existentialism (Michelman 2010, s.v. 'Abbagnano'). Western philosophy, he explains, has historically conceived nothingness mainly in the following two ways:

a. Parmenides' way: nothingness as non-being.

b. Plato's way: nothingness as alterity or negation (Abbagnano 1971, s.v. 'nulla').

Hegel embraces Parmenides' view arguing that everything possesses both being and nothingness (Hegel 2010, part I, sec. I, § I). Sartre based his masterpiece, *Being and Nothingness*, on this very idea. Existentialism in general embraces Parmenides' view and applies it to human beings. Humans are, but their being is not permanent, because they die. Thus, compared to permanent Being, their being is nothingness. The being of humans is essentially lack of real, stable being. In this sense, they have being and they have nothingness. This explains nothingness's centrality to existentialism: humans seek to escape their nothingness and persist in their being. As Cornelio Fabro writes, 'l'esistenzialismo si è assunta la "lotta contro il nulla"' (Fabro 2010, vol. XI, 61).

2.2 The linguistic and etymological background

Most European languages construct the notion of nothingness in a somewhat post-Parmenidean way by negating being. The terms for 'nothingness' relevant to this project – *nulla, niente, néant, rien, Nichts, nada, nihil*, and *nothingness* – share a clear etymological lineage that goes from modern languages back through Latin to Greek.

2.2.1 European Languages and the negation of being

The most striking feature of these words is the prefix *n-*, as the signifier of negation. *Nulla* derives from *non-ullus*, meaning 'no thing', or 'not a thing'.[76] This same combination produces the French words *nullité*, *annullation*, *nul* etc. *Niente*, on the other hand, would derive from *nec-ens* or *nec-gens* (*-entem*), meaning again 'no thing', 'non-entity', or 'no one' (*Vocabolario Treccani Online*, s.v. 'niente').[77] French *néant* has the same Latin root,[78] meaning 'non-être … la privation de l'être'.[79] *Rien* appears to derive from Latin *rem* (accusative of *res*).[80] Originally used with a negative particle, it then acquired the meaning of 'nothing' even in non-negative sentences (the opposite happened to the word 'personne').[81] The same logic applies to English 'nothing', which is simply the union of the negative particle and 'thing'. The same also applies to Spanish and German. Finally, Latin *nihil* stems from Greek (*Zib*. 2307): Leopardi proposes the etymology of *nihil* as *ne hil*,[82] the latter coming from the Greek ὕλη.[83] He writes:

[76] Leopardi is also concerned with this etymological analysis in *Zib*. 2306-12. 30 dicembre 1821.
[77] Accessed 26 June 2025, Link.
[78] *Dictionnaire de français Larousse Online*, s.v. 'néant', accessed 26 June 2025, Link.
[79] *Trésor de la Langue Française informatisé*, s.v. 'néant', accessed 2 February 2023, Link.
[80] *Dictionnaire de français Larousse Online*, s.v. 'rien', accessed 26 June 2025, Link.
[81] *Trésor de la Langue Française informatisé*, s.v. 'néant', accessed 2 February 2023, Link.
[82] This idea is sustained also by the *Etymological Dictionary of Latin*, ed. Michiel de Vaan (2008), s.v. 'hilum', accessed 2 February 2023, Link.
[83] De Vaan writes 'no etymology', ibid.

> se avrete niente di spirito filosofico, vedrete quanto sia naturale e probabile che siccome *ne homo* cioè *nemo*, vuol dire *nessuna persona*, così *ne hil* cioè *nihil* volesse dire primitivamente *nessuna materia*, cioè *nessuna cosa* …ovvero *non materia*, *non cosa*, cioè, insomma, e formalmente ed espressamente, *nulla*. (Così i greci οὐδὲν *neque unum* ec. *non quidquam*, μηδὲν, οὔτι, μήτι ec.) (*Zib*. 2311 ff.).

Οὐδὲν is the word used by Gorgias for 'nothingness', together with τό μή ὄν, the non-being, in his *On Non-being or On Nature* (Diels and Kranz 1996). The Greek word for 'nothingness' was also probably formed along similar lines: οὐδὲν combines the negative particle οὐ/οὐκ with ἕν (*unum*, one). Plato uses the phrase τό μή ὄν in his *Sophist* (passim) and *Gorgias* (passim) to mean 'nothingness' (Plato 2019, passim). In Plotinus' *Enneads* we find τό μηδέν (*Enneads* 3.8.10 and passim), equivalent to Gorgias's οὐδὲν.

Greek, Latin, and the modern European languages analysed here all form the word for 'nothingness' by adding a negative particle before the word for 'being'. Philosophically, this means that the notion of nothingness implies the notion of being in order to negate it. For Greek, Latin, and these modern languages, therefore, nothingness is not something that has its own status. Things are different, for example, in the *Book of Qohélet*.

2.2.2 Hebrew and Qohélet's *Hebèl*

The *Book of Qohélet* is entirely built on the well-known notion of 'vanity' – *hebèl* (הֶבֶל, Eccles. 1:2 and passim), which literally means 'a vapour', 'a breath' (Douglas 1962, s.v. 'vanity'). The metaphor of vapour, or breath, 'indicates the fruitlessness of human endeavours' (ibid.). Guido Ceronetti argues that the word *hebèl* should be translated into Italian with 'vuoto, niente, vanità, soffio' (2001, 117): the corresponding superlative ('vanity of vanities' – *hebèl hebelìm*) should be translated with 'absolute nothing'. Literally, however, *hebèl* means 'l'infinito fluire fisico delle cose […] di cui la vanità non sarebbe che l'essenza giudicata' (Ceronetti 2001, 118). Qohélet seems therefore to picture the universe like Leopardi as a 'perpetuo circuito di produzione e distruzione' (*Dialogo*

della Natura e di un Islandese, 280). *Hebèl hebelìm* is 'tutto il fare e l'andare che non arrivano a niente' (Ceronetti 2001, 118). Finally, '*hebèl* non ha tempo' (Ceronetti 2001, 118), like Leopardi's existence, 'che mai non è cominciata' and 'non avrà mai fine' (*Cantico del gallo silvestre*, 473).

Qohélet's *hebèl* is closer to Leopardi's *being*, i.e., matter, existence, rather than nothingness. Qohélet is a fundamental point of reference for Leopardi and for the entire philosophical and literary tradition of the West, but the Western notion of nothingness does not derive from that text. Its origin is Greek, and in particular Parmenidean. In the languages involved in this project, nothingness is sayable and thinkable only in relation to and after being. The philosophical consequence of this linguistic phenomenon is, as Sartre writes in *Being and Nothingness*, that 'nothingness [is] logically subsequent to [being], since it presupposes being in order to negate it' (Sartre 2020, 49).[84]

[84] 'le néant lui [*sc*. l'être] serait logiquement postérieur puisqu'il suppose l'être pour le nier' (Sartre 1943, 50).

3. Feeling nothingness

Before being understood, nothingness is felt – and that can take various forms.

3.1 Boredom

'La noia', Leopardi writes, 'è il desiderio della felicità, lasciato, per così dir, puro' (*Zib*. 3715. 17 ottobre 1823). Boredom is the feeling of the gap between the absolute happiness that we desire and the unhappiness of the human condition. Alessandra Aloisi describes boredom as follows: 'noia è sapere che nessun oggetto sarà mai in grado di soddisfare il nostro desiderio di un piacere infinito e, tuttavia, non poter smettere di desiderarlo' (Aloisi 2010b, 248).[85] The human condition is nothingness compared to the absolute happiness we desire. Boredom is thus the feeling of this existential nothingness: 'il nulla nell'esistenza […] e il sentimento di esso, e della *nullità* di ciò che *è*, e di quegli stesso che la concepisce e sente' (*Zib*. 2220. 3 dicembre 1821; italics in the original). Boredom is the nothingness of existence, and the nothingness of the very being who perceives it – the human being. This feeling is so overwhelming that it feels like the only real thing: 'si può dire che, essendo tutto l'altro vano, alla noia riducasi, e in lei consista, quanto la vita degli uomini ha di sostanzievole e di reale' (*Dialogo di Plotino e di Porfirio*, 552; see also Leopardi's famous letter to Jacoppsen, 23 June 1823, in Leopardi 1998a). In reference to Leopardi's notion of boredom, Abbagnano writes: 'più profondamente [di Schopenhauer] e anticipando l'esistenzialismo, Leopardi vedeva nella noia l'esperienza della nullità di tutto ciò che è'; 'Heidegger ha ripetuto queste notazioni' (Abbagnano 1971, s.v. 'noia'). This is a very important remark, highlighting the depth of Leopardi's

[85] Norbert Jonard identifies the two main references for Leopardi's notion of 'noia' in Pascal and Condillac (Jonard 1964). Diderot's and D'Alambert's *Encyclopédie* is also relevant, as it defines 'ennui' in terms akin to Leopardi's: 'une espèce de déplasir, […] l'*ennui* est le plus dangereux ennemi de notre être' (Diderot and D'Alambert 1751-1765, s.v. 'ennui'). See more on Leopardi's notion of 'noia' in Aloisi 2010a.

notion of boredom and its solid link with the boredom discussed by the existentialists. Let us expand on Abbagnano's examples. One of the most important vehicles of Leopardi's notion of 'noia' is the poem *A se stesso* (1833), in the passage quoted by Nietzsche in *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life*, i.e., the second *Untimely Meditation*. Hamerling renders the Italian 'noia' as 'Langeweile', the same word later used by Heidegger.

In *Nausea*, Sartre describes boredom as 'the profound heart of existence, the very matter I am made of' (2000, 210).[86] In the text, boredom appears to be a milder version of nausea, but fundamentally akin to it (ibid.), so much so that Norbert Jonard links Leopardi's 'noia' to Sartre's 'ennui': 'l'ennui est un mal moderne qui exprime le désarroi de l'homme qui s'interroge sur son existence sans jamais pouvoir apporter une réponse' (Jonard 1964, 381). In *Being and Nothingness*, boredom and nausea are presented as immediate modes of confronting being (2020, 6).[87] For Sartre, these emotions reveal the gratuitousness of existence, i.e., the absence of any preordained meaning. This is how boredom and nausea are feelings of nothingness.

Leopardi occasionally employs the term 'nausea' himself, albeit without the philosophical weight the term has in Sartre. As is often the case, the bridge-figure between Leopardi and Sartre is Nietzsche, who, in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), writes: 'once truth has been seen, the consciousness of it prompts man to see only what is terrible or absurd in existence wherever he looks: he feels revulsion' (1999, 40).[88] In the full passage, the word 'revulsion' (Ger. *Ekelt*) recurs twice. Interestingly, Sossio Giametta translates the first occurrence as the Italian 'nausea', and the second one as 'disgusto', revealing a potential link with Leopardi, who uses 'nausea' with a similar nuance (see Nietzsche

[86] 'le cœur profond de l'existence, la matière même dont je suis fait' (1965, 174).
[87] 'l'être nous sera dévoilé par quelque moyen d'accès immédiat, l'ennui, la nausée, etc.' (Sartre 1943, 14).
[88] 'In der Bewusstheit der einmal geschauten Wahrheit sieht jetzt der Mensch überall nur das Entsetzliche oder Absurde des Seins: […] es *ekelt* ihn' (Nietzsche 2021, vol. I, 57; italics in the original).

2017a, 47). The word 'disgusto' is also notably used by Leopardi, coupled with 'noia', to describe an existential malaise: 'in qualunque cosa tu non cerchi altro che piacere, tu non lo trovi mai: tu non provi altro che noia, e spesso disgusto' (*Zib*. 4266. 30 marzo 1827). Heidegger, too, regards boredom (Ger. *Langeweile*) 'as a basic ontological mood' (Michelman 2010, s.v. 'boredom') which underlines the lack of purpose in human existence (see Heidegger 1983, 238).[89] These existentialist parallels led Luporini to argue that in Leopardi

> la *noia* […] diventa organo di conoscenza assoluta e filosofica, conoscenza emozionale, stato d'animo decisivo, che contrassegna la posizione 'metafisica' dell'uomo nell'universo, la sua grandezza e la sua miseria: la conoscenza e l'esperienza del nulla, legato intrinsecamente e direttamente […] all'*esistenza* (1996, 72; italics in the original).

Luporini also contends that Leopardi's boredom has the same function anguish has in Kierkegaard – that of revealing the meaninglessness of existence (1996, 80).

Another key figure of Italian existentialism, Alberto Caracciolo, notes that boredom is for Leopardi the very hallmark of the human being's dignity, as is for the existentialists (1990, 57). Feeling boredom means accusing things of being nothing compared to our desire for the infinite; and yet, Leopardi writes: 'pare a me il maggior segno di grandezza e di nobiltà, che si vegga della natura umana. Perciò la noia è poco nota agli uomini di nessun momento, e pochissimo o nulla agli altri animali' (*Pensieri*, LXVIII).[90]

[89] In *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, Heidegger distinguishes three connotations within the notion of boredom, but we are going to stop at Sartre in this instance. One of the most successful comparisons between Leopardi and Heidegger based on the notion of nothingness was accomplished by Gino Zaccaria (2008).

[90] Citations from Leopardi's *Pensieri* refer to Leopardi 1982b. Boredom is also a crucial theme for Alberto Moravia, who treats it in his novel *La noia* (1960). Sartre was familiar with the works of Moravia (Demoulin 2020, 87, 101), but it is hard to establish to what extent. For Leopardi's presence in Moravia see Lombardi 2008.

3.2 Anguish

As in the case of 'nausea', Leopardi's use of the word 'angoscia' has no overtly philosophical implications.[91] To the existentialist notion of anguish, Severino still equates Leopardi's 'noia' (Severino 1997, passim), as do many others (Luporini 1996, 72; Binni 1987, 64; Scrivano 1998, 375 ff.). Yet they all stop at a mere juxtaposition of the two notions.

Two different connotations are to be distinguished within the existentialist notion of anguish. In *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844), Kierkegaard famously offers a theorisation of anguish that will greatly influence the existentialists.[92] He compares anguish to dizziness: 'he whose eye happens to look down into the yawning abyss becomes dizzy. […] Anguish is the dizziness of freedom' (1981, 61). Anguish is the feeling aroused by the infinite freedom we are condemned to. The object of anguish, Kierkegaard argues, is nothingness: 'if we ask more particularly what the object of anguish is, then the answer […] must be that it is nothing' (1981, 96). This differentiates anguish from fear: fear is fear of something defined; anguish is fear of nothing – that is, it is precisely the absence of what I need that frightens (anguishes) me. The anguish of freedom is the lack of indications on how we should act, and such lack paralyses us. Kierkegaard's anguish arises, to begin with, from the necessity to determine ourselves.

The two connotations of anguish in existentialism are anguish towards nothingness and anguish towards freedom. Yet, since freedom means lack of indications, and this lack of indications we can call ontological/normative nothingness, the two definitions imply one another, as Sartre understood (2020, 66). Anguish towards freedom is a recurring theme in Kierkegaard, while anguish towards nothingness is more typical of Heidegger

[91] The most relevant uses of 'angoscia' are in *Zib*. 448 and in the *Canti* (six times).
[92] 'Anguish' and 'anxiety' are used interchangeably in the scholarship on existentialism.

and Leopardi. Drawing from them, Sartre keeps the two connotations together in his own definition of anguish as 'the consciousness of being one's own future, in the mode of not-being' (2020, 70).[93] In simpler terms, the consciousness of being free. For Sartre, freedom entails the absence of pre-set values, forcing us to act on our own and unjustifiable ones. Nothingness is that void, between my past and my future, which condemns me to be free. Maurizio Schoepflin explains the two connotations of anguish very effectively:

> l'ateo Sartre collega l'angoscia da una parte (cfr. *La nausea*) all'insensatezza e all'insignificanza della vita umana [as does Leopardi], dall'altra, […] alla terribile responsabilità che incombe sull'uomo quando compie le proprie scelte [as does Kierkegaard] (Schoepflin in Sartre 2008, 44. Square brackets are mine).

Anguish towards nothingness is linked to Leopardi's 'noia'; anguish towards freedom to Kierkegaard's 'Angest' (anguish).

If these two connotations imply one another, we should be able to detect at least a hint of the second one, too, in Leopardi. The text to look at is *L'infinito*:

Ma sedendo e mirando, interminati
Spazi di là da quella, e sovrumani
Silenzi, e profondissima quiete
Io nel pensier mi fingo; ove per poco
Il cor non si spaura.
(*L'infinito*, ll. 4-8)

The heart of the poet is frightened by no one defined object, but rather by nothingness itself: this 'spaurarsi' is not ordinary fear of something specific, but more properly anguish. As Antonio Prete writes, 'spazio e tempo sono gli "ultimi" orizzonti che comprendono il corpo, ma la loro massima dilatazione, come *infinito*, […] è […] fonte d'angoscia' (Prete 2006, 57; italics in the original). Frank Rosengarten, too, in relation to Leopardi's poetry in general, speaks of 'existential anguish' (2012, 37, 105). The 'anguishing effect' is also achieved through what Luigi Blasucci famously called 'the

[93] 'la conscience d'être son propre avenir sur le mode du n'être-pas' (Sartre 1943, 67).

signals of the infinite' (Blasucci 1985), particularly the many plurals in the text ('interminati spazi', 'sovrumani silenzi').

Anguish is evoked explicitly in *Alla luna*: 'sovra questo colle io venia pien d'angoscia a rimirarti' (ll. 2-3). Again, its cause is not clearly identifiable; the poet probably refers to a general existential malaise. In his reading of the *Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia*, Alberto Caracciolo speaks of 'angoscia metafisica' (1994, 46) and equates, like Abbagnano, Heidegger's anguish to the feelings expressed in *L'infinito*, *Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia*, and *Cantico del gallo silvestre* (1983, 57, 235).[94]

Yet there is a crucial difference between Kierkegaard's, Leopardi's, and Sartre's notions of anguish. For Kierkegaard, as a Christian existentialist, anguish is the absurdity of what it takes to gain salvation. This emerges in *Fear and Trembling* (1843), where Abraham is commanded to kill his firstborn without explanation. Will he obey? Can his faith stand the trial? This is Kierkegaard's anguish. The anguish-producing choice, however, always takes place between alternatives that are pre-given by God. For Kierkegaard there still is an ultimate meaning, however hard to attain, and anguish, if overcome, can acquire meaning within the greater picture of God's plan. For Sartre and Leopardi there is no such picture, no God giving orders, and anguish reflects existence's irremediable absurdity. In their philosophy there is no room for meaning, outside the one we give to ourselves.

[94] The *Canto notturno* is especially interesting for an existentialist analysis and is more deeply analysed in Chapter 2 section 2.

3.3 Despair

Despair is initially described by Leopardi as essentially the same as boredom, in the wake of Pascal (*Zib*. 485. 10 gennaio 1821), but subsequently as a lighter feeling (*Zib*. 2219. 3 dicembre 1821). The definition of despair we can extrapolate from his writings is as a painful lack of hope in an ultimate good. This time the parallel with Kierkegaard is almost perfect. Despair is what awaits the ones that do not believe in God:

> L'uomo non vive d'altro che di religione o d'illusioni. Questa è proposizione esatta e incontrastabile: Tolta [sic] la religione e le illusioni radicalmente, ogni uomo, anzi ogni fanciullo alla prima facoltà di ragionare […] si ucciderebbe infallibilmente di propria mano (*Zib*. 216. 18-20 agosto 1820).

The link between religion and illusions is that religion is the only chance to turn illusions into realities (see *Zib*. 410):

> L'esperienza conferma che l'uomo qual è ridotto, non può esser felice sodamente e durevolmente (quanto può esserlo quaggiù) se non in uno stato (ma veramente) religioso, cioè che dia un corpo e una verità alle illusioni, senza le quali non c'è felicità (*Zib*. 411. 9-15 dicembre 1820).

These passages occur early in the *Zibaldone*, but Leopardi will not change his position in this regard. The absence of God, and thus the falsity of religion, remains the real cause of our existential despair. That faith gives meaning to existence, and that without faith anyone would fall ill with despair is precisely Kierkegaard's thesis in *The Sickness unto Death* ([1849] Kierkegaard 1983; see also Kierkegaard 1987). The sickness unto death is the state of despair humans fall into without religion. Kierkegaard's very title, *The Sickness unto Death*, usually translated into Italian with *La malattia mortale*, is quite noteworthy, because Leopardi also uses the phrase in reference to Christianity: 'il Cristianesimo fece certo un gran bene, e sostenne il mondo crollante, sovvenendo con una medicina composta della ragione, alla malattia mortale cagionata da essa ragione' (*Zib*.

427. 18 dicembre 1820).[95] For both Kierkegaard and Leopardi, Christianity is the only cure for the sickness unto death of despair. On top of that, one can accept or refuse the cure, but that becomes a different problem.

Kierkegaard famously holds that despair is a choice (see 1987, II, 129) – a choice between paradox and reason. For Kierkegaard, existence is about choosing what to *believe* in, since belief in reason is nonetheless belief. If we believe in God, we can sustain the hope of an infinitely better and longer life after death, and thus be happy in this life as well. If we do not believe in God, we believe in the nothingness of existence and we fall into despair. Believing in God is believing in the paradox (Christian revelation), believing in nothing is believing in reason (the evidence of nothingness). Kierkegaard and Leopardi both respond to Pascal's wage: Kierkegaard chose paradoxical faith; Leopardi rational disbelief.[96]

The Spanish existentialist Miguel de Unamuno also shares this understanding of despair.[97] Unamuno describes despair as the state of mind of someone 'who strives to believe in another life – because he needs another life – and finds he can not so believe' (1972, 107).[98] Unamuno thought that Leopardi was one of these people (ibid., 137). This state of mind 'is worthy of respect' because it is 'the most noble, most profound, most human and most fruitful attitude and state of mind' (1972, 107).[99] These words aptly describe Leopardi's melancholic and reluctant abandonment of belief in the true infinite, and thus in eternal life. The true infinite, as opposed to the indefinite, does not exist for

[95] Leopardi's 'malattia mortale' is a negatively-connotated scepticism, very close to despair. Leopardi's 'despairing man' is also compared by Riccardo Pugliese to Kierkegaard and Sartre (see Pugliese 2024, 10-11). The phrase is used two more times in the *Epistolary* but in its literal sense of 'deadly physical illness'.
[96] This problem is greatly expanded in Chapter 3 section 9.
[97] For his belonging to existentialism see at least Prini 1989, Solomon 2005, and Aho 2020.
[98] 'empeñándose en creer que la hay, porque la necesita, no logra creerlo' (1983, 146).
[99] 'Pero de este nobilísimo, y el más profundo, y el más humano, y el más fecundo estado de ánimo' (ibid.).

Leopardi, yet it nonetheless plays a crucial role in his works, as that is what he truly desires.[100]

Now, how do boredom and despair relate to one another in Leopardi? In the *Dialogo di Torquato Tasso e del suo Genio familiare*, the genius lists three remedies to boredom: 'il sonno, l'oppio, e il dolore' (257), the latter being 'il più potente di tutti: perché l'uomo mentre patisce, non si annoia per niuna maniera' (ibid.). The human condition is a pendulum backward and forward between pain and boredom.[101]

3.4 Alienation

Alienation can be defined as a sense of estrangement. For Kierkegaard, it is mainly an estrangement from God (in sin); for Sartre an estrangement from other people; for Heidegger it can be estrangement from ourselves (if we live inauthentically) or from the world (Heidegger's notion of 'thrownness'). Leopardi identifies mainly two forms of alienation. The first is alienation from nature, meaning a detachment from our natural instincts and illusions. That is how animals and children live, and, to some extent, the ancients – which is why they are happier than modern people: 'noi siamo del tutto alienati dalla natura, e quindi infelicissimi' (*Zib*. 814. 19 marzo 1821). The second kind is alienation from the world, very much akin to Heidegger's 'thrownness'. That means being forced to enter a ready-made world without appeal: 'Da-sein exists as thrown, brought into its there *not* of its own accord' writes Heidegger in *Being and Time* (1996, § 58; italics in the original).[102] Leopardi describes the human condition in these same terms in the *Dialogo di Torquato Tasso e del suo genio familiare*, where Tasso states that 'il vivere

[100] See why in Costa 2024.
[101] Sartre, similarly to Leopardi, links despair to the feeling of the vanity of existence, to the feeling that 'toutes les activités humaines sont équivalentes' (Sartre 1943, 675).
[102] 'Seiend ist das Dasein geworfenes, nicht von ihm selbst in sein Da gebracht' (Heidegger 1967, § 58). Paolo Pellecchia also speaks of 'thrownness into existence' for the case of Leopardi (see Pellecchia 2024).

è di sua propria natura uno stato violento' (256). The same occurs in the *Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese*, where the Icelander compares human birth to an unwelcome invitation to a ruined and humid cell: 'quivi mi fosse dato per dimorare una cella tutta lacera e rovinosa, dove io fossi in continuo pericolo di essere oppresso; umida, fetida, aperta al vento e alla pioggia' (*Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese*, 279). His protest to Nature – the host – strongly expresses what Heidegger means by 'thrownness':

> t'ho io forse pregato di pormi in questo universo? […] Ma se di tua volontà, e senza mia saputa, e in maniera che io non poteva sconsentirlo nè ripugnarlo, tu stessa, colle tue mani, mi vi hai collocato; non è egli dunque ufficio tuo, se non tenermi lieto e contento in questo tuo regno, almeno vietare che io non vi sia tribolato e straziato, e che l'abitarvi non mi noccia? (*Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese*, 280)

Heidegger's and Leopardi's notion of alienation can be traced back, once again, to Pascal, who describes humanity as being 'with no light abandoned to itself, lost in the nook of the universe not knowing who put us there, what we have come to achieve, what will become of us when we die' (2008, 65). Pascal admits he becomes 'frightened, like someone taken in his sleep to a terrifying, desert island who wakes up with no knowledge of what has happened, nor means of escape' (ibid.).[103] Pascal's island, Leopardi's cell, and Heidegger's world are all rewritings of Plato's cave, albeit with a few, important differences. First, as Pascal says, there is no escaping from the island; Leopardi's metaphor of the cell is even stronger; Heidegger's version, in a way, is even stronger than Leopardi's as there is no need for a metaphor anymore: our world is clearly a place we are thrown into – Heidegger seems to be saying. Second, there is no light outside of the cave/island/cell to be reached. Third and foremost, philosophy does not lead us out of the cave but deeper down into it.

[103] 'sans lumière, abandonné à lui-même et comme égaré dans ce recoin de l'univers, sans savoir qui l'y a mis, ce qu'il y est venu faire, ce qu'il deviendra en mourant'; 'j'entre en effroi, comme un homme qu'on aurait porté endormi dans une île déserte et effroyable et qui s'éveillerait sans connaître où il est, et sans moyen d'en sortir' (Pascal 2015, § 693).

This ‘thrown’ condition is distilled in *Il tramonto della luna*, where the carter, abandoned by the moon’s light, confronts a directionless life:

Abbandonata, oscura
resta la vita. In lei porgendo il guardo,
cerca il confuso viatore invano
del cammin lungo che avanzar si sente
meta o ragione; e vede
ch’a sé l’umana sede,
esso a lei veramente è fatto *estrano*.

(*Il tramonto della luna*, ll. 27-33; italics mine)

The protest against the human condition is a feature of many existentialists. Dostoevsky’s Ivàn Karamazov, for example, is eager to ‘give back the entrance ticket to this existence’ (2012, 389). The Dostoevsky scholar Aleksandr Krinitsyn claims that Dostoevsky had read Leopardi’s *Operette morali* before writing his *Brothers Karamazov* (Krinitsyn 2013). Whilst no ultimate proof of this has been found yet, what is certain is that they treat human alienated condition in very similar terms, and that they have contributed to the writings of later existentialists.[104] Alienation can be ultimately defined as the feeling of a deep contradiction between our existential condition and the world, to the point that ‘è meglio assoluto ai viventi il non essere che l’essere’ (*Zib*. 4100. 3 giugno 1824).

Conclusion

Boredom, nausea, anguish, and despair are all feelings of nothingness, albeit with different connotations: boredom is feeling our desire of the infinite being consistently frustrated; nausea is feeling the gratuitousness of existence; anguish is the vertigo before nothingness or freedom; despair is lacking hope in an ultimate good. From the perspective

[104] As I have shown (Costa 2024), it is very likely that Dostoevsky was familiar with at least some of Leopardi’s texts.

of atheistic existentialism, they can all be seen as feelings of the absurdity of existence. Future scholarship must accord Leopardi the same weight as Kierkegaard in mapping these themes – not as a mere precursor, but as a foundational voice.[105]

[105] I could not include the treatment of 'indifference' as a feeling of nothingness, but it appears a very promising one, linking Leopardi directly to Camus' *The Stranger* and Moravia's *Gli indifferenti*. The topic is widely treated in the *Zibaldone* and considered a feature, like the other feelings of nothingness, of modern humanity – rational and disillusioned (see Damiani in Leopardi 1997b, 4066 ff.).

4. Metaphors of nothingness

Existentialist writing uniquely bridges philosophy and literature by expressing nothingness through concrete, bodily metaphors.

The feelings of nothingness are also expressed by the existentialists through metaphors, which are at times better suited than philosophical concepts to convey notions that can often more readily be felt than thought. Leopardi speaks of the feeling of nothingness, from the very beginning of the *Zibaldone*, as a 'certo e profondo sentimento […], sentimento non di solo raziocinio, ma vero e per modo di dire sensibilissimo sentimento e dolorosissimo' (*Zib*. 106). Leopardi's philosophy often operates through metaphors rather than traditional logic. Metaphors, in his philosophy, seek to 'trovare rapporti tra i più diversi aspetti del reale, […] far interagire oggetti tra loro incompatibili, e in tal modo sostituire la tradizionale logica razionale e sistematica con una conoscenza alogica' (Del Gatto 2012, VII). Bridging poetry and philosophy through metaphors is central to Leopardi's existentialism. Let us now focus on the most meaningful existentialist metaphors of nothingness.

4.1 Nothingness as a sensation

In the *Dialogo di Plotino e di Porfirio*, Porphyry describes his despair at existence as a sensory overload of emptiness:

> non solo conoscere, ma vedere, gustare, toccare la vanità di ogni cosa […]. Di maniera che non solo l'intelletto mio, ma tutti i sentimenti, ancora del corpo, sono (per un modo di dire strano, ma accomodato al caso) pieni di questa vanità (*Dialogo di Plotino e di Porfirio*, 551-52).

Leopardi builds a strong tension between the desire for the infinite and nothingness. This tension stems from two stylistic devices: first, the enumeration of verbs ('non solo conoscere, ma vedere, gustare, toccare') culminating in the bodily absurdity of being 'full of vanity'; second, the parenthesis '(per un modo di dire strano, ma accomodato al caso)' heightens the tension before the paradoxical final phrase 'pieni di questa vanità', conveying a certain solidity, as it were, of nothingness.

Nothingness, therefore, possesses first of all a material dimension that can almost be touched. This material dimension of nothingness is one of the dominant themes of the first part of the *Zibaldone*, where Leopardi speaks of having 'quasi per le mani il nulla delle cose' (*Zib*. 215).[106] In Sartre's *Nausea*, the protagonist Antoine Roquentin also describes how he can almost touch the absurdity of existence (Sartre 1965, 144). Leopardi and Sartre also metaphorise nothingness as suffocation: 'io mi sentiva come soffocare considerando e sentendo che tutto è nulla, solido nulla' (*Zib*. 85), and Roquentin: 'I'm suffocating: existence penetrates me everywhere, through the eyes, the nose, the mouth...' (Sartre 2000, 119).[107]

Nothingness can even daze one. From a physiological point of view, dizziness also has similar causes and symptoms to suffocation (Savundra 2003). The feeling existentialists describe resembles the aftermath of a deafening sound. In a letter to Pietro Giordani, Leopardi writes: 'sono così stordito dal niente che mi circonda, che non so come abbia forza di prender la penna per rispondere' (19th November 1819, in Leopardi 1998a). Similarly, Roquentin feels 'stunned [Fr. *étourdi*] by this profusion of beings without origin' (2000, 123).[108] At first glance, it might seem that Leopardi is dazed and suffocated

[106] See also *Zib*. 141: 'sensibile e palpabile la vanità delle cose', and other occurrences of the feeling of nothingness in *Zib*. 103, 106, 136, 215, 1364, 2220.
[107] 'je suffoque : l'existence me pénètre de partout, par les yeux, par le nez, par la bouche…' (Sartre 1965, 141).
[108] 'Je me laissai aller sur le banc, étourdi, assommé par cette profusion d'êtres sans origine' (1965, 149).

by nothingness, while Roquentin is by being: this, however, happens only at a quite superficial level, as they are in fact dazed and suffocated by 'the nothingness of being'. Below, it will become very clear what that means.

Nothingness can also sometimes be tasted, as emerges from a letter to Giordani: 'io v'aspetto impazientissimamente, mangiato dalla malinconia, […] bevendomi questi giorni o amari o scipitissimi, senza un filo di dolce nè d'altro sapore che possa andare a sangue a nessuno' (14th August 1818; in Leopardi 1998a). Sartre also employs the gustatory metaphor, describing Roquentin's nausea as an unpleasant 'sweetish sickness' (2000, 20).[109]

In the poem *Ad Angelo Mai* (1820), nothingness is presented as a physical presence: 'A noi presso la culla / Immoto siede, e su la tomba, il nulla' (*Ad Angelo Mai*, lines 74-75). The metaphorisation of nothingness reaches here such a high degree of strength that it becomes a prosopopoeia: nothingness is anthropomorphised, like Nature in *Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese*. The same strength is found in the letter to André Jacopssen: 'le néant des choses était pour moi la seule chose qui existait' (23th June 1823; in Leopardi 1998a). In Leopardi and Sartre, the stylistics of nothingness is tantamount to an *aesthetics* of nothingness – understood etymologically as sensorial knowledge. Feeling nothingness is a form of knowledge, prior to, and to some extent independent from, rational knowledge.

4.2 Nothingness as space

Nothingness is at other times metaphorised as a space: 'io era spaventato nel trovarmi in mezzo al nulla' (*Zib*. 72). With death, this spatial nothingness escalates to a universal

[109] 'C'était une espèce d'écœurement douceâtre. Que c'était donc désagréable !' (Sartre 1965, 18).

void: 'è un nulla anche questo mio dolore, che in un certo tempo passerà e s'annullerà, lasciandomi in un vôto universale' (ibid.). The voided space of nothingness is the destination of existence, but also its origin: 'pare che l'essere delle cose abbia per suo proprio ed unico obbietto il morire. Non potendo morire quel che non era, perciò *dal nulla scaturirono le cose che sono*' (*Cantico del gallo silvestre*, 471; italics mine). In *Nausea*, once again, we find something very similar: 'all these existents which bustled about this tree came from nowhere and were going nowhere' (2000, 123).[110] Thus, 'il nulla è necessariamente luogo' (*Zib*. 4233. 14 dicembre 1826). Sartre proposes the same: 'space… is *nothing*' (2020, 260; italics in the original).[111] Space is the mode of being of nothingness, in which case nothingness is pure potentiality for being.

One of the most dramatic metaphors of nothingness in all of the existentialist production appears in Nietzsche's *Gay Science* (1882), where the madman proclaims the famous 'death of God' and describes, in shock, its consequences:

> Where are we moving to? Away from all suns? Are we not continually falling? […] Is there still an up and a down? Aren't we straying as though through an infinite nothing? Isn't empty space breathing at us? […] Isn't night and more night coming again and again? (2001, § 125).[112]

Leopardi's, Sartre's, and Nietzsche's images all owe, to varying degrees, to Pascal's treatment of infinite nothingness in his *Pensées*: 'the eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me' (2008, § 233).[113] These metaphors capture the disorientation of existence deprived of any metaphysical certainties.

[110] 'tous ces existants qui s'affairaient autour de l'arbre ne venaient de nulle part et n'allaient nulle part. Tout d'un coup ils existaient et ensuite, tout d'un coup, ils n'existaient plus' (Sartre 1965, 150).
[111] 'l'espace […] n'est *rien*' (Sartre 1943, 2020; italics in the original).
[112] Wohin bewegen wir uns? Fort von allen Sonnen? Stürzen wir nicht fortwährend? […] Giebt es noch ein Oben und ein Unten? Irren wir nicht wie durch ein unendliches Nichts? Haucht uns nicht der leere Raum an? […] Kommt nicht immerfort die Nacht und mehr Nacht? (Nietzsche 2021, vol. III, § 125).
[113] 'Le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis m'effraie' (Pascal 2015, § 206).

4.3 Nothingness as night

Nothingness is also metaphorised as night, as an image for the epistemological and spiritual condition in the aftermath of God's death. Leopardi employs it in many of his texts (*Zib.* 50, *Coro di morti*, and passim). In this sense Severino speaks – linking Leopardi to Nietzsche – of a 'profonda notte del nulla' (1997, passim). Both Leopardi and Nietzsche use the cycle of day as a metaphor for the epistemological stages of humankind. Leopardi's 'strage delle illusioni', for example, and Nietzsche's 'destruction of old values' are metaphorised as twilight, preceding the night of nihilism. This happens in *Il tramonto della luna*, where the setting of the moon represents the loss of illusions:

Nell'infinito seno
Scende la luna; […]
In fuga
Van l'ombre e le sembianze
Dei dilettosi inganni.
(*Il tramonto della luna*, ll. 11-26)

What follows is the night of nihilism:

Abbandonata, oscura
Resta la vita.
In lei porgendo il guardo,
Cerca il confuso viatore invano
Del cammin lungo che avanzar si sente
Meta o ragione […].
(*Il tramonto della luna*, ll.15-31)

Leopardi's moon has the same function as Nietzsche's sun in *The Gay Science*: it is the source of directions in an otherwise meaningless space. Now, a twilight and a subsequent night imply a preceding noon. For Leopardi and Nietzsche, this represents the age of belief – whether in the form of youthful illusions or the historical epoch of Christianity

and its metaphysical certainty. Every night, however, also contains within itself the promise of a dawn: for Leopardi, the new dawn is the 'risorgimento' of lost illusions; for Nietzsche, the coming of the Übermensch creating new values (see Nietzsche 2021, vol. IV, passim). This cyclical structure gives the night metaphor its peculiar force: night is not a mere absence, but the prelude to a future rebirth.[114]

4.4 'Man is nothing' and 'All is nothing'

Among Leopardi's most persistent and powerful metaphors are those that identify nothingness with the human being itself ('man is nothing') and with the totality of being ('all is nothing'). These formulations appear often throughout his work: from the early *Zibaldone* entries ('Io era spaventato di trovarmi in mezzo al nulla, un nulla io medesimo', *Zib*. 85; 'tutto è nulla', *Zib*. 72), to late poems such as *La ginestra* ('Questo / Globo ove l'uomo è nulla', l. 173) and *A se stesso* ('l'infinita vanità del tutto', l. 16). These are Leopardi's answers to some of the fundamental questions of existentialism: What is the human being? What is being? The case of the human being is addressed in Chapter 2. Let us now focus on the 'tutto è nulla'.

The famous adagio 'tutto è nulla' (*Zib*. 72 and passim) expresses Leopardi's belief about the nature of being. The idea begins to take shape in *Il passero solitario* (ll. 53-57), *La sera del dì di festa* (ll. 33-39), the *Cantico del gallo silvestre*, and many other texts: 'infinita vanità del tutto' (*A se stesso*, l. 16), 'tutto il reale essendo un nulla…' (*Zib*. 99), 'tutto è vanità' (*Zib*. 3990). Nothingness here does not refer to matter or existence, because all that exists is being for Leopardi, and thus will remain forever.[115] While

[114] In this cycle, Nietzsche ultimately sees the eternal recurrence of the same (see Negri 1994).
[115] Leopardi proposes the etymology of 'nulla' as non-matter, non-existence in *Zib*. 2307 ff. This idea is supported by de Vaan 2008, s.v. 'hilum'.

poetically asserting that 'dal nulla scaturirono le cose che sono', he clarifies that this is 'conclusione poetica, non filosofica. Parlando filosoficamente, l'esistenza, che non è mai cominciata, non avrà mai fine' (*Cantico del gallo silvestre*, 473). Therefore, nothing stems from nothingness.[116] Leopardi's position is not to be understood physically, but morally and existentially. He is not talking about being in itself, which is mere matter that will exist forever; he is talking about the *meaning* of being. 'A dileguarsi e perdersi', then, is not matter, but rather the things that give meaning to matter. What will remain of our achievements in life after we die? What of our friendships, what of the people we loved? These are Leopardi's questions. Everything disappoints us, because everything falls short of our desire for the infinite. Leopardi, like Sartre (see 2020, 57 ff.), maintains the ontological permanence of being while asserting its existential emptiness. The word 'vanità' marks this shift from the physical to the moral and existential. 'Tutto è nulla' and 'tutto è vanità', therefore, are not perfectly synonymous: 'tutto è nulla' is an ontological judgement; 'tutto è vanità' is a moral one. 'Vanità' is the moral translation of nothingness – vanity is a lack of happiness.[117] Thus, 'tutto è nulla' does not mean that matter equals nothingness, which would be an absurd claim – it means that it is *as if* all were nothing because all that exists is nothing with regard to our happiness.

[116] Sartre also makes this point in *Being and Nothingness* (2020, 57 ff.).
[117] The etymology of *vanus* (-a, -um), whilst uncertain, seems linked to the idea of emptiness. See 'vānus' in de Vaan 2008.

5. The foundation of existentialism

The fundamental principle of existentialism – 'existence precedes essence' – can also be read as the fundamental principle of Leopardi's philosophy.

Many have tried to identify a foundational idea of Leopardi's philosophy. That is no easy task, given the unsystematic nature of his thought.[118] A compelling step toward such a foundational idea has recently been made by Luigi Capitano, who has highlighted that Leopardi subverts the foundational principle of idealism: thought precedes being, or, which is the same, essence precedes existence (Capitano 2016, 546 and passim). This subversion has been interpreted as nihilism by Emanuele Severino and Luigi Capitano (see Costa 2023). This subversion constitutes a 'paradigm shift' that gives birth to what Paola Cori has called 'the age of disenchantment', i.e., 'the replacement of the eternal with the ephemeral vision of the world' (Cori 2019, 99). In *Leopardi. L'alba del nichilismo*, Capitano writes: 'la vera rivoluzione copernicana del nichilismo consiste […nella] inversione dei rapporti di predicazione che pone al centro il soggetto finito e concreto, in luogo dell'astratto e dell'infinito' (2016, 546). This nihilist reading is fascinating and compelling. And yet, the subversion of 'essence precedes existence', rigorously speaking, is 'existence precedes essence' – the foundational principle of existentialism.[119] This makes Leopardi an existentialist before making him a nihilist. To

[118] On the problem whether Leopardi's philosophy is a system see Cervato 2017, 47-104. On this issue, Paola Cori writes that 'while a strong impulse for project-planning certainly animates Leopardi's daily notebook writing, it is however a fact that these projects remained as such and were never accomplished' (Cori 2019, 12). I align myself more with Cori's view than Fabiana Cacciapuoti's belief that the *Zibaldone* can rightly be considered a system (see Cacciapuoti 2010).

[119] For the precedence of existence over essence in existentialism, see, above all, Nietzsche 2021, vol. V, passim; Sartre 1943, passim; Heidegger 1967, 46; Marcel 1949, 99; Jaspers 1971, 62-63.

argue in favour of their nihilist interpretation of Leopardi, Severino and Capitano focus mainly on two passages:

1. 'il principio delle cose, e di Dio stesso, è il nulla' (*Zib*. 1341. 18 luglio 1821).

2. 'certo è che distrutte le forme Platoniche preesistenti alle cose, è distrutto Iddio' (*Zib*. 1342. 18 luglio 1821).

As I will soon show, however, these conclusions are underpinned by the more fundamental idea that existence precedes essence. This idea is one of the few in Leopardi's works that resists falsification, and his views in possibly all fields are consequences of it. The idea surfaces in various ways throughout Leopardi's writings but is expressed with the most clarity in the heart of the *Zibaldone*:

> Niente preesiste alle cose. Nè forme, o idee, nè necessità nè ragione di essere, e di essere così o così ec. ec. *Tutto* è posteriore all'*esistenza* (*Zib*. 1616. 3 settembre 1821; italics in the original).

This is the passage that overturns idealism and gives birth to existentialism. In the first instance, the passage states that existence is the original fact, irreducible to anything else.[120] At first glance, it may not be clear how this implies that existence precedes essence: that is because the word 'essence' is concealed in its older formulations of 'form' and 'idea'. Yet forms and ideas are for Greek philosophy what 'essences' are for Scholasticism.[121] Now, if 'forms' and 'ideas' are philosophically synonymous with 'essences', and if forms and ideas are posterior to existence, then essences, too, are posterior to existence. Put concisely, essence is posterior to existence. In its logically

[120] Similar conclusions are reached in *Zib*. 1340 and 1908-11.

[121] See, for instance, Abbagnano 1971, s.v. 'essenza', and Barrett 1962, 103: 'Essences Plato called Ideas'. Even Aquinas himself: 'essentia […] dicitur etiam forma' and 'usya enim apud Grecos idem est quod essentia apud nos' (*De ente et essentia*, I and II). Leopardi uses all of them because so do his sources. Immediately after his existentialist conclusion in *Zib*. 1616, Leopardi mentions a passage from Augustine taken from *Responses to Miscellaneous Questions*, where Augustine also writes: 'in Latin, then, we can call ideas either forms or species' (Augustine 2008, 59).

equivalent version: existence precedes essence. This principle, as we have seen in the Introduction, is the most widely accepted definition of existentialism. We can thus conclude that Leopardi, in the *Zibaldone*, formulates the foundational principle of existentialism.[122]

The relationship between essence and existence was widely discussed in Scholastic philosophy: it is from these discussions that Leopardi begins his own.[123] The problem of whether existence precedes essence or vice versa returns to the centre of Western philosophy with existentialism, where it is endowed with a whole new humanistic, dramatic dimension. In the *Letter on Humanism*, one of the major texts of existentialism, Heidegger explains Sartre's position with exceptional clarity:

> Sartre expresses the basic tenet of existentialism in this way: Existence precedes essence. In this statement, he is taking *existentia* and *essentia* according to their metaphysical meaning, which from Plato's time on has said that *essentia* precedes *existentia*. Sartre reverses this statement (Heidegger 1998, 250).[124]

We should now recognise that, before Sartre, Leopardi had already performed such reversal. Seen from this perspective, Leopardi's existentialism theoretically coincides with his anti-Platonism, understood as rejection of innate ideas – a view widely acknowledged by the scholarship (see, among others, Biral 1962; Severino 1990, 1997; Luporini 1996; D'Intino 2009b; Bellucci 2010; Carrera 2013; Donà 2013; Capitano 2016 et al.). Nietzsche himself reads Leopardi as an anti-Platonist, and that is the image he

[122] In the French edition of the *Zibaldone*, Bertrand Schefer comments on *Zib*.1616 as follows: 'Leopardi formule ainsi strictement la thèse existentialiste telle qu'on la retrouvera plus tard chez Kierkegaard' (in Leopardi 2004, *Zib*. 1616n1) – but really he should have said 'chez Sartre', as Kierkegaard does not hold the precedence of existence over essence, as I will show shortly.

[123] See for example *Zib*. 1465-66, where Leopardi underlines the crucial importance of the Scholastic terminology for all subsequent philosophy. On the problem of existence and essence in Aquinas see also Kenny 2008, ch. 7. In his *Dissertazione sopra l'esistenza di un ente supremo*, the young Giacomo employs the classic a priori argument to prove God's existence from His essence.

[124] Sartre spricht dagegen den Grundsatz des Existentialismus so aus: die Existenz geht der Essenz voran. Er nimmt dabei existentia und essentia im Sinne der Metaphysik, die seit Plato sagt: die essentia geht der existentia voraus. Sartre kehrt diesen Satz um (Heidegger 2004, 328).

diffracted onto subsequent thinkers.[125] If existentialism overturns idealism, i.e., the precedence of idea (essence) over reality (existence), it is no surprise, then, that the primary target of the existentialists is Hegel, as Beauvoir and many scholars argue.[126] Sartre writes that for Hegel 'being is surrounded by its essence, which is its foundation and origin, […] Being presupposes Essence' (2020, 46).[127] Existentialism takes the opposite view. Barrett defines it exactly as 'a radical effort to break with this Platonic tradition' (1962, 80), that is the belief, radicalised by Hegel, that the idea (essence) ontologically precedes the thing it represents (existence).[128] Barrett sees Western philosophy as divided into two dominant strains – essentialism and existentialism:

> Plato's is the classic and indeed archetypal expression of a philosophy which we may now call *essentialism*, which holds that essence is prior in reality to existence. *Existentialism*, by contrast, is the philosophy that holds existence to be prior to essence. The history of Western philosophy has been one long conflict, sometimes explicit but more often hidden and veiled, between essentialism and existentialism (1962, 104).[129]

Essentialists are Plato, Duns Scotus, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant, Hegel. Existentialists – in the broad sense just described – are Augustine, Montaigne, Pascal, Leopardi, Nietzsche, Sartre, and the other 20th-century authors already mentioned. Barrett writes that 'Kierkegaard and Nietzsche in the nineteenth century were the first to reverse this Platonic scale of values and to establish the individual, the single one […] as taking

[125] See for example an 1875 note where Leopardi, described as 'a true thinker', is contrasted to Plato (see Nietzsche 2021, vol. VII).
[126] See Beauvoir 2018, 8. Gilson also writes that 'it is not surprising that the refutation of Hegel's deduction of existence is the source of contemporary existentialism' (1994, 226. My transl.).
[127] 'l'être est enveloppé par l'essence, qui en est le fondement et l'origine, […] l'être présuppose l'Essence' (Sartre 1943, 48). Sartre is referring to Hegel's *Logic (for the Middle Class)* now collected in Hegel 1986, 76.
[128] The continuous reference to Plato was also reinforced in Leopardi's mind by Dutens' *Origine delle scoperte attribuite a' moderni* (1789), where he read about Descartes and Leibniz. The chapter devoted to innate ideas is entitled: 'Idee innate di Cartesio, e di Leibnizio tirate da Platone, da Eraclito, da Pitagora, e da' Caldei'. Dutens argues that the arguments for innateness are essentially taken by Descartes and Leibniz from Plato (1789, I, ch. II, 41).
[129] 'Essentialism' is also how Christina Howells defines the doctrine Sartre's attacks (see Howells 1988, 2). The distinction between essentialism and existentialism is also employed by Gilson (1952) and used in contemporary philosophy by Sossio Giametta (see Giametta 2021), who conceives of himself as an essentialist in the wake of Spinoza.

precedence over the universal' (1962, 85). Yet it is now clear that the turn from essentialism to existentialism occurs in Leopardi, much more explicitly, as I will show below, than in Kierkegaard or Nietzsche.

The name of Plato is veiled under the term 'idee'; Aristotle under 'forme'; 'necessità' probably refers to Descartes, Spinoza, and in general to those philosophers who believe in the possibility of deriving existence necessarily, *à la* Plotinus, from a First Cause. Spinoza, for examples, writes: 'nothing in nature is contingent but everything is determined to exist and to operate in a specific way by the necessity of the divine nature' (*Ethics*, I, proposition 29 in Spinoza 2018, 28). He also writes: 'things could not have been produced by God in any other way or in any other order than they have been produced' (*Ethics*, I, proposition 33 in Spinoza 2018, 31).[130] These statements are radically contradicted by Leopardi:

> Le cose non sono quali sono se non perch'elle son tali. Ragione preesistente, o dell'esistenza o del suo modo, ragione anteriore e indipendente dall'essere e dal modo di essere delle cose, questa ragione non v'è, nè si può immaginare. Quindi nessuna necessità nè di veruna esistenza, nè di tale o tale, e così o così fatta esistenza (*Zib*. 1613. 2 settembre 1821).[131]

The radical contingency of existence is one of the key tenets of Sartre's philosophy. In *Nausea*, we find: 'the essential thing is contingency. I mean that, by definition, existence is not necessity' (2000, 188).[132] 'Being is, without reason, without cause and without necessity', Sartre writes in *Being and Nothingness* (2020, 801).[133] Leopardi similarly insists that we cannot 'giudicare delle cose avanti le cose, e conoscerle al di là del puro fatto reale'; nothing is in fact to be found 'al di là del puro fatto reale', i.e., beyond what

[130] 'in rerum natura nullum datur contingens; sed omnia ex necessitate divinae naturae determinata sunt ad certo modo existendum et operandum'; 'res nullo alio modo, neque alio ordine a Deo produci potuerunt, quam productae sunt' (*Ethica*, I, propositio XXIX et XXXIII).
[131] According to Toni Negri, Leopardi was familiar with Spinoza's *Ethics* (see Negri 1987, 377n54 and 2006, 343 ff.).
[132] 'l'essentiel c'est la contingence. Je veux dire que, par définition, l'existence n'est pas la nécessité' (1965, 147).
[133] 'L'être est, sans raison, sans cause et sans nécessité' (Sartre 1943, 667).

actually exists (*Zib*. 1341-42). Beings appear, and behind them there is nothing else. And by 'nothing else', existentialists mean that there are no essences preceding things, no Platonic ideas, or Kantian noumena: 'things are entirely what they appear to be – and behind them ... there is nothing' (Sartre 2000, 92).[134] Thus, Leopardi asks: 'come dunque immaginiamo noi un Essere necessario?' (*Zib*. 1613. 2 settembre 1821). 'No necessary being can explain existence' Sartre replies (2000, 188).[135] Leopardi and 20th-century existentialists reject necessitarianism in favour of a radical contingentism.

Finally, the phrase 'ragione di essere, e di essere così o così' (still in *Zib*. 1616) clearly refers to Leibniz's principle of sufficient reason. Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz – according to Étienne Gilson – were deeply influenced by Duns Scotus (Gilson 1952). Through them, Scotus's precedence of essence shaped modern philosophy, Gilson contends (1952, 88). 'This bias toward essence', Barrett also concludes, 'continued supreme and in fact almost unchallenged until Kierkegaard [and we can add Leopardi] appeared' (1962, 106). At the opposite end of Duns Scotus, Gilson and Barret place St. Thomas, who would instead accord ontological precedence to existence rather than essence (Gilson 1952, 94; Barrett 1962, 104 ff.). One might thus be tempted to conclude that existentialism began with St. Thomas. But even if one managed to successfully prove that the priority of existence over essence does in fact apply to Aquinas's thought, his context is arguably far too distant from 20th-century existentialism. The same applies to philosophers like Locke, Hume, and Berkeley, who, like all empiricists, might be said to consider existence more originary than essence. Yet again, they are part of a much different intellectual, historical, and social environment than the one of existentialism. That is not the case for Leopardi. He is the real initiator of existentialism understood as

[134] 'les choses sont tout entières ce qu'elles paraissent – et derrière elles… il n'y a rien' (Sartre 1965, 109).
[135] 'Aucun être nécessaire ne peut expliquer l'existence' (Sartre 1965, 147).

the philosophy of anguish, the question on the meaning of existence, and the primacy of existence over essence. Pascal is less remote and is indeed an important reference for the existentialists, yet he never claimed that existence precedes essence. Pascal displays the emotional component of existentialism, but he lacks the theoretical one. The opposite, one could say, is true for St. Thomas, who might be said to display the theoretical component but definitely lacks the emotional one. In neither case do we have existentialism. It is only with Leopardi that we have both components, and the time is ripe. This is why Alberto Caracciolo places Leopardi 'tra i "padri" dell'esistenzialismo' (1983, 79).

And what about Kierkegaard? Does he display both the theoretical and the 'emotional' component of the movement? He certainly embodies what I have called the 'emotional' side of existentialism, which indeed earned him the title of 'father' of the movement. He was also the first to reserve the term 'existence' for human beings (Fabro 1943, ch. I; Abbagnano 1971, s.v. 'esistenza'; Cooper 2012, 34). But if we look for the theoretical core of existentialism in his writings, we find the opposite. John W. Elrod studied this very problem in Kierkegaard and concluded that:

> Kierkegaard does not, with Sartre, abandon the 'essentialist' formula 'essence precedes existence'. If this formula expresses one of the main presuppositions of western philosophy, then Kierkegaard remains within this tradition (Elrod 1975, 199-200).

Not only does Kierkegaard never endorse the core idea of existentialism, but he holds the opposite view: 'essence precedes existence'. To assume otherwise is to beg the question: just because Kierkegaard has traditionally been considered the 'father' of existentialism, he is also thought to endorse the existentialist principle. But that would be an incorrect conclusion. This point – a crucial one for this work – is further discussed in the Conclusion.

We have seen that essentialism is the foundation of Plato's philosophy, while existentialism is the foundation of Leopardi's. Now, according to Barrett: 'all of Plato's […] philosophy [is] in fact a working out of the consequences of this fundamental conviction of the priority of essence over existence for every field of human experience: for government, ethics, aesthetics' (Barrett 1962, 104). It would now be interesting to investigate whether the same applies to Leopardi: how does the precedence of existence over essence shape Leopardi's writings? And what new readings does it prompt? Leopardi articulates the existentialist principle explicitly in the summer of 1821. That marks its explicit, fully conscious, and philosophically rigorous formulation, but the existentialist principle lies more or less concealed in all of his writings, before and after 1821, and it underpins his beliefs across virtually all domains, much as essentialism underpins Plato's. In other texts, the existentialist principle 'existence precedes essence' takes different, but compatible forms. These are, above all, 'nature precedes reason' (*Zib*. 1842 and passim) and 'the irrational precedes the rational' (*Zib*. passim). Thus: existence/nature/irrational precedes essence/reason/rational. The rest of this study is devoted to the working out of the implications of the existentialist principle in Leopardi's works. In the following sections, we will explore how this principle informs Leopardi's understanding of ontology, ethics, and aesthetics. To nature and the irrational is devoted Chapter 3.

6. Application to ontology: all is nothing

Leopardi does not identify Being and nothingness, as Severino claims. Nothingness is not to be understood physically, but existentially: all is meaningless, all is absurd.

Leopardi's statements that 'tutto è nulla' (*Zib*. 72) and that 'il principio delle cose, e di Dio stesso, è il nulla' (*Zib*. 1341) have generated much disagreement among scholars. Through the existentialist principle, however, they acquire a clearer meaning.

A corollary of the existentialist principle that scholars widely accept is the rejection of innate ideas. By 'innate ideas', Leopardi means the Platonic ideas that exist a priori before things, and of which things are mere copies. Leopardi follows Locke in rejecting innate ideas: 'era un sogno di Platone che le idee delle cose esistessero innanzi a queste, in maniera che queste non potessero esistere altrimenti' (*Zib*. 154. 6 luglio 1820).[136] He maintains with Locke that the only 'madre comune di tutte le idee' is experience, but goes beyond Locke in two key ways. Firstly, he 'pushes Locke's statement to the logical extreme: if there are no innate ideas, then there are no absolute ideas' (Carrera 2013, 146). This means, for example, that if the notions of good and evil are not set a priori once and for all, then it is impossible to decide what is good and what is evil absolutely. Secondly, as Bortolo Martinelli noted, Locke still retains the idea of God by postulation and tries to prove His existence a posteriori (Martinelli 2003, 190-91). Leopardi does not.

Martinelli, however, critiques Leopardi's argument as flawed, accusing him of a sleight of hand: the negation of innate ideas does not, he argues, entail the negation of God's existence (2003, 194). In the traditional a priori proofs of the existence of God, however, the starting point is always the innate idea of God. If one rejects this idea, the

[136] Locke problematises the innate ideas of 'same' and 'God' in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (see Locke 2008, 1.4.4 and 1.4.8-17).

possibility of proving God's existence falls with it. Leopardi thus legitimately concludes that if we reject innate ideas, we lose the possibility of proving God's existence a priori. In his words: 'certo è che distrutte le forme Platoniche preesistenti alle cose, è distrutto Iddio' (*Zib*. 1342. 18 luglio 1821). The a posteriori arguments remain logically available to Leopardi, but he does not seem interested in them. This is how he reaches the conclusion that 'il principio delle cose, e di Dio stesso, è il nulla' (*Zib*. 1341). But what does that mean?

One of the most fascinating and widely discussed interpretations of this passage is Severino's. Severino claims that Leopardi identifies Being and nothingness, thus falling in the fundamental contradiction of Western philosophy.[137] Severino sees his idea confirmed by the variously repeated 'tutto è nulla' (*Zib*. 72). The passages 'tutto è nulla' and 'il principio delle cose […] è il nulla' are certainly connected, yet Leopardi does not identify Being and nothingness. Such an identification is impossible to argue from his text, and this can be shown in just a few steps. Leopardi unequivocally equates being with matter.[138] Stating the eternity of matter would thus be equal to stating the eternity of being. The eternity of matter is clearly stated in the *Frammento apocrifo di Stratone da Lampsaco* (1825): 'la materia stessa niuno incominciamento ebbe, cioè […] ella è per sua propria forza ab eterno [sic]' (478).[139] Besides, the eternity of existence itself is affirmed in the famous footnote to the *Cantico del gallo silvestre*: 'parlando filosoficamente, l'esistenza che mai non è cominciata, non avrà mai fine' (472).[140] These notes rule out

[137] This is Severino's core interpretation of Leopardi, proposed in his three volumes on Leopardi (1990; 1997; 2015). See a wider discussion of Severino's take on Leopardi in Costa 2023.
[138] See *Zib*. 631 and passim.
[139] The same is stated in the *Zibaldone*: 'la materia sarebbe eterna, e nulla perciò vi sarebbe d'infinito. Ciò non vorrebbe dire altro, se non che la materia, cosa finita, non avrebbe mai cominciato ad essere, nè mai lascerebbe di essere' (*Zib*. 4181. 4 giugno 1826).
[140] This is what Martinelli 2003, 88-89 also objects to Severino. Laura Melosi writes that 'rileggendo il *Cantico del gallo silvestre* per la stampa fiorentina del 1834, Leopardi avverte la necessità di chiarire la propria posizione ideologica. Così apposta al finale la nota [which I quote in the text – author's note]. That

any possibility of identifying Being with nothingness in Leopardi. Being has always been and always will be. That is all. Leopardi seems to almost reply to Severino when he writes:

> se dal vedere che le cose materiali crescono e diminuiscono e all'ultimo si dissolvono, conchiudesi che elle non sono per se nè ab eterno [sic], ma incominciate e prodotte, per lo contrario quello che mai non cresce nè scema e mai non perisce, si dovrà giudicare che mai non cominciasse e che non provenga da causa alcuna (*Frammento apocrifo di Stratone da Lampsaco*, 483).

Now, to the potential objection that these are literary texts, and as thus not to be taken at face value, I would respond that the same conclusion is reached in the *Zibaldone*: 'le morti e distruzioni corporali, non sono altro che trasformazioni di sostanze e di qualità, e il fine di esse non è la morte, ma la vita perpetua della gran macchina naturale' (*Zib*. 2220-21. 3 dicembre 1821). Leopardi is stating that the deaths of individuals and the transformation of matter, i.e., their becoming, do not have anything to do with nothingness. Nothingness is the vanity of all those deaths and transformations, and even the very lives of those individuals, because all of that has brought no happiness to anyone. As I said above, 'tutto è nulla' is not to be understood physically, but morally. That things are nothingness not in themselves but in relation to our happiness is also claimed in the following passage: 'non ch'elle [*sc*. le cose esistenti] sieno cose da nulla, ma non sono di quella sorta che l'uomo indeterminatamente vorrebbe […]. Così elleno son nulla alla felicità dell'uomo, non essendo un nulla per se medesime' (*Zib*. 2936. 10 luglio 1823). Leopardi's tendency to judge things according to the impact they have on the life of the individual is quite typical of his thought. A fascinating instance of this can be seen in *Il Risorgimento*:

Piansi spogliata, esanime
Fatta per me la vita;
La terra inaridita,

existence has no beginning nor end is 'ciò che si incarica di dimostrare il *Frammento apocrifo*' (Melosi in Leopardi 2008, 473).

Chiusa in eterno gel;
Deserto il dì; la tacita
Notte più sola e bruna;
Spenta per me la luna,
Spente le stelle in ciel.

(*Il Risorgimento*, ll. 17-24)

This is not a scientific analysis of Earth, the moon, or the stars. It is a poetic expression of what they mean to the poet. Note the anaphora of 'per me'. What matters to Leopardi is not what these things are in themselves, but what they mean to the individual. The moon does not have the property of being 'turned on or off'. Stars do, but that is clearly not what Leopardi is referring to. Stars light up if my life is lit up. Similarly, things are something, if they are something to me – that is, if they mean something to me. To conclude, Severino claims that Leopardi falls into the contradiction of identifying being and nothingness; but he does not, asserting instead that being and matter coincide, but matter is eternal, therefore being is eternal too. Severino's analysis is fascinating, but ultimately not compelling because of its arbitrariness and its remoteness from Leopardi's texts.

The existentialist lens offers a more coherent interpretation of the two passages: existence is the originary fact, irreducible to anything prior; nothing precedes or causes it. Existence does not stem from nothingness, as it does not stem from any pre-existing being. Existence does not stem from anything – this is the meaning of 'il principio delle cose […] è il nulla'. Existence simply is, and that is all. Similarly, 'tutto è nulla' is not to be understood as a self-contradictory claim that Being and nothingness coincide; it means that Being has no meaning, and therefore it is nothing *to us*.[141] Being is, but in a way that

[141] This is also Massimo Donà's reading (2013).

makes us unhappy: hence, it is *as if* it were nothing. This is what the lines of *Il Risorgimento* express: 'Che non del ben sollecita [la natura] / Fu, ma dell'esser solo' (ll. 121-22): Nature cared to create being, not well-being. And in Leopardi's unique view, if the living beings are not happy, it is as if they were nothing. One can appreciate how it is once again happiness that plays the key role here, and that Leopardi's stress on individual happiness is so strong that his moral philosophy ends up determining his ontology: if I am unhappy, I am nothing. This, however, is not the case for Sartre, for whom, on the contrary, ontology determines morality: it is because human beings have no essence that they are free to choose what to be. The subtitle of *L'Être et le Néant* is *Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique*, which Sartre writes in 1943, well before his *Cahiers pour une morale*, which never overcame the state of sketches and were published posthumously.[142]

With his existentialism, Leopardi answers the central question of metaphysics: why is there being, rather than nothingness? He answers as Heidegger will after him (Severino 1997, 17). In *The Essence of Ground* (1929), Heidegger explains that the word 'why' implies the quest for a foundational principle of being (1998, 130). The question could thus be reformulated as follows: *by virtue of what* is there being rather than nothingness? Leopardi's and the existentialists' answer is that being has no prior principle, or, in Leopardi's terms, that the principle of being is nothingness. Therefore, *by virtue of nothing* there is being rather than nothing: there is being, that is all. This irreducibility of being to anything prior is also what entails its unintelligibility and absurdity.

[142] This, however, does not mean that for Sartre ethics is simply a logical derivation of ontology. See a discussion of this problem in Howells 1988, 27-45.

7. Nothingness as possibility

Nothingness can also be seen as a lack of necessity, and thus be reinterpreted as infinite possibility.

The existentialist interpretation of 'il principio delle cose […] è il nulla' has an important implication: if existence is not caused by anything prior, this also means that it might have been different from what it is. Nothing precedes existence, nothing except that 'might'. Existence is and is in certain ways, but not necessarily so: 'nessuna necessità nè di veruna esistenza, nè di tale o tale, e così o così fatta esistenza' (*Zib*. 1613. 2 settembre 1821). Existence is for Leopardi, as David Jérôme writes, a 'surgissement contingent' (2021, 97). Jérôme states correctly that Leopardi's philosophy 'détruit l'idée de nécessité et lui substitue celle de contingence radicale de l'être' (2021, 170). If 'nessuna cosa è assolutamente necessaria', then 'tutte le cose sono possibili' (*Zib*. 1341. 17 luglio 1821). Nothingness is here understood as a lack of necessity, and therefore as infinite possibility: 'è vero che niente preesiste alle cose. Non preesiste dunque la necessità. Ma pur preesiste la possibilità' (*Zib*. 1619. 3 settembre 1821).

To fully appreciate Leopardi's position, we must consider the greater picture of the notion of possibility. As Abbagnano explains, Aristotle gave three definitions of 'possible' in the *Metaphysics* (Aristotle 2020, 1019 b), which correspond to the three different meanings the word has acquired over the history of Western philosophy (see Abbagnano 1971, s.v. 'possibile'):

1. 'Possible' as 'non-contradictory' or 'logically thinkable'. This is the logical definition.

2. ‘Possible’ as ‘real possibility’, understood as something which at some point will necessarily become real. This is Hegel’s notion of possibility (see Hegel 2010, § 147).

3. ‘Possible’ as ‘objective possibility’, understood as something about which it is impossible to know a priori whether or not it will become real. Abbagnano specifies that this is Kierkegaard’s and the existentialists’ notion of possibility, explicitly opposed to Hegel’s. This is the kind of possibility that pertains to human beings, the realm in which dramatic, existential change happens.

The latter notion may indeed be present in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, but it is only with Kierkegaard – and Leopardi – that it starts to play a major role in the history of philosophy, acquiring existential features which could not be present in Aristotle. The originality of the idea that things are possible rather than necessary is clearer if one considers that the most prominent philosophers of Leopardi’s and Kierkegaard’s time held that everything was necessary. These are the German idealists, who, in this regard, follow Descartes (see *Letter to Princess Elizabeth*, 6 October 1645 in Descartes 1984, vol. III, 268) and Spinoza’s *Ethics* (see Spinoza 2018, I, 33, scol. 1). In Fichte’s *The Characteristics of the Present Age*, for example, we find: ‘whatever actually exists, exists of absolute necessity; and necessarily exists in the precise form in which it does exist; it is impossible that it should not exist, or exist otherwise than as it does’ (1847, 132-33).[143] This is the exact opposite of what Leopardi entertains: ‘le cose non sono quali sono, se non perch’elle son tali. Ragione preesistente, o dell’esistenza o del suo modo, […] questa

[143] ‘was da nur wirklich da ist, ist schlechthin nothwendig da, und ist schlechthin nothwendig also da, wie es da ist; es könnte nicht auch nicht da seyn, noch könnte es auch anders da seyn, als es da ist’ (Fichte 1806, 9). The same idea is famously held by Hegel’s *Science of Logic* (see Hegel 2010).

ragione non v'è, nè si può immaginare. Quindi nessuna necessità nè di veruna esistenza, nè di tale o tale, e così o così fatta esistenza' (*Zib*. 1613. 2 settembre 1821).

Reinterpreting nothingness as possibility gives us room to make of existence what we choose. Nothingness should not be understood as an ultimate judgement about existence, because 'chi può conoscere i limiti della possibilità?' Leopardi applies this phrase to the potential infinity of evil (*Zib*. 4174), but it can be applied just as rightly to good. A hint of this good is, after all, present in the *Zibaldone*:

> come possiamo chiamar vile e nulla quell'opera di cui non vediamo nè potremo mai vedere nemmeno i limiti? Nè arrivar mai ad intendere nè anche a sufficientemente ammirare l'artifizio e il modo? Anzi neppur la qualità della massima parte di lei? (*Zib*. 2938-39. 10 luglio 1823).

We simply do not have a sufficient understanding of existence, and in fact our ignorance greatly outweighs our knowledge of it. Nobody knows what existence is. How, then, can we call it 'nothingness'? Instead, 'we must be sceptical even of our scepticism', as Russell writes in his *Sceptical Essays* (2004, 120). In the passage just mentioned, Leopardi provides a small critique, as it were, of pure reason: pure reason is greatly limited, to the point that such limits prevent us from reaching an encompassing and reliable understanding of existence. Nothingness is then just *one* of the possible beliefs one can entertain about the nature of existence. As such, it is subject to scepticism just as any other belief. Possibility is the consequence of acknowledging the limits of reason. Beyond the limits of our reason (which seeks to establish relationships of necessity) is the realm of the possible, of the unforeseeable. Upon such lack of constraint, our freedom can create meaning. This is the premise for Chapter 3.

8. Application to ethics and aesthetics: all is relative

Applied to ethics and aesthetics, the existentialist principle entails the relativity of notions such as good and evil, and beautiful and ugly. Actions and aesthetic features can only be classified a posteriori, by examining their effects.

> Noi stessi nelle nostre riflessioni giornaliere le meno profonde, conosciamo e sentiamo che la virtù (p. e.) è un fantasma, e che non c'è ragione per cui la tal cosa sia virtù, se non giova, nè vizio se non nuoce; […] così veniamo a confessare che la virtù, il vizio, il cattivo, il buono è relativo (*Zib*. 1461. 7 agosto 1821).

Morality is relative. This conclusion can be reached on the basis of everyday experience alone, Leopardi claims – yet only, make no mistake, if your worldview is existentialist. Plato, or Kant, for example, would strongly disagree with the relativity of morality, and would instead derive moral behaviour from notions of good and evil which they regard as absolute and eternal.

Leopardi begins his analysis with aesthetics, and only then turns to morality. So let us start from the former. Leopardi's inspiration is Montesquieu's *Essai sur le Goût*, which critiques the absoluteness of taste.[144] Not only does Leopardi agree that taste is relative, but he makes the case that, when it comes to aesthetics in general, existence precedes essence. In his *Notebooks for an Ethics*, Sartre applies the existentialist principle to history: 'in History, too, existence precedes essence. […] History is what one makes of it' (1992, 32).[145] In discussing the Romantic conception of art, Leopardi applies it to aesthetics:

> Le teorie delle quali i romantici han fatto tanto romore a' nostri giorni, avrebbero dovuto restringersi a provare che non c'è bello assoluto, nè quindi buon gusto stabile, e norma universale di esso per tutti i tempi e popoli; […] che le regole assolutamente parlando non esistono. […] Tutto è quistione di nomi, e le regole non dipendono se non dal modo

[144] The first edition of the *Essai* dates back to 1757, but Leopardi reads the 1781 edition (Damiani in Leopardi 1997b, 3225).
[145] 'Dans l'Histoire aussi l'existence précède l'essence. […] L'Histoire est ce qu'on la fait' (Sartre 1983, 38).

> in cui la cosa è: non esistono prima della cosa, ma nascono con lei, o da lei (*Zib*. 1671-73. 11 settembre 1821).

For the case of art, the principle that 'existence precedes essence' could be translated as 'the work of art precedes the features that define it'. Leopardi gives the example of Homer: 'Omero fu certamente anteriore alle regole del poema epico. Anzi esse da' suoi poemi furono cavate' (*Zib*. 3095-96. 5-11 agosto 1823). Before Homer, there was no such thing as an epic poem: the existence of Homer's works precedes the very notion of 'epic poem', i.e., what an epic poem even *is*. Thinking otherwise is a mistake, Leopardi warns: 'considerandole [*sc*. le regole del poema epico…] come indipendenti da Omero, come sussistenti da se, e supponendo (il che non è vero) ch'elle sieno il parto della ragione e della specolazione assoluta' (*Zib*. 3095-96. 5-11 agosto 1823). Those who regard the features of the epic poem as prior to and independent from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* treat them as innate ideas, and are therefore mistaken. People came to know what epic poems *were* only after they came into existence. The existence of epic poems precedes their essence.

From the relativity of beauty, Leopardi derives the relativity of morality – relative, that is, to individuals, historical periods, geographical locations and so on. He writes: 'variando le circostanze, e quindi le convenienze, varia ancor la morale, nè v'è legge alcuna scolpita primordialmente ne' nostri cuori [as Kant thinks]; che molto meno v'è una morale eterna e preesistente alla natura delle cose [as Plato thinks]' (*Zib*. 1637-1638. 5-7 settembre 1821).[146] Since this is a direct consequence of the existentialist principle, Sartre cannot but hold the same: 'there is no abstract ethics. There is only ethics in a

[146] Leopardi repeats this notion often: 'or questo medesimo non dimostra dunque evidentemente la non esistenza di una morale eterna, assoluta, *antecedente*? (*Zib*. 2264. 20 dicembre 1821; italics in the original), and 'il giudizio e il senso del bene e del male, giusto e ingiusto, non è che relativo, e senz'alcun tipo o ragione *antecedente*. ec. ec. ec.' (*Zib*. 2031. 1° novembre 1821; italics in the original). Leopardi's relative morality has been studied widely. Besides Tilgher's still highly relevant analysis (1940, 76 ff.), see Capitano's especially rich analysis in Capitano 2016, passim, and Fenoglio 2020.

situation' (1992, 17).[147] The relativity of morality is also the basis of Beauvoir's ethics of ambiguity: 'there exists no absolute value before the passion of man, outside of it, in relation to which one might distinguish the useless from the useful' (Beauvoir 2018, 9).[148] Those who seek to rescue the absoluteness of morality – in the way Kant does – are forced to ground moral values in God:

> le ragioni di tutto ciò [i.e., della distinzione tra la virtù e il vizio – author's note] noi siamo costretti a riporle in un Essere dove personifichiamo il bene, la virtù, la verità, la giustizia ec. facendolo assolutamente, e per assoluta necessità, buono (*Zib*. 1462-64. 7 agosto 1821).

Yet we have previously concluded that the postulation of this 'necessary Being' is forced and logically illegitimate. As Christina Howells explains, the same applies to Sartre: 'the Kantian ethic, for Sartre, depends on a God who guarantees the practice of morality (or duty) for its own sake; it is universal, absolute, eternal and abstract', and for these reasons rejected by Sartre (Howells 1988, 33). Leopardi's existentialism is no different. It is different, however, from Nietzsche's and Dostoevsky's. For Leopardi, the relativity of morality is not the logical consequence of the absence of God (as for Nietzsche and Dostoevsky), but its premise.[149] Leopardi's argument develops as follows: 'we see that there is no absolute and clear distinction between virtue and vice; the only way of guaranteeing an absolute distinction between them is to postulate a necessary Being; but this postulation is illegitimate because it is not grounded in any datum of experience: therefore, God does not exist (or at least there is no legitimate way of claiming that He does)'. Leopardi does not say 'if God does not exist, then everything is permitted' (see Dostoevsky 2008, 691 and Dostoevsky 2012, 92), but 'everything is permitted, therefore God does not exist'. In this sense, the existentialist principle informs theology, too,

[147] 'Il n'y a pas de morale abstraite. Il n'y a qu'une morale en situation donc concrète' (Sartre 1983, 24).
[148] 'il n'existe pas avant la passion de l'homme, en dehors d'elle, aucune valeur absolue par rapport à laquelle on pourrait définir l'inutile et l'utile' (Beauvoir 1947, 15-16).
[149] For Dostoevsky see *Devils* ([1873] 2008) and *The Brothers Karamazov* ([1879] 2012); for Nietzsche see *Beyond Good and Evil* ([1886] 2002).

showing the impossibility of a being who exists before existence, i.e., a being where essence precedes existence.

The relativity of morals is the basis of the existentialist ethics in general. This becomes clear in *Genealogy of Morals* (1887), in which, in the wake of Dostoevsky, Nietzsche writes: '"nothing is true, everything is permitted"… Certainly *that* was *freedom* of the mind' (Nietzsche 2016, part III, § 24; italics in the original).[150] Existentialism, however, strives to resist moral nihilism, even though it logically follows from the awareness of lacking the absolute – as is honestly recognised by Sartre in *Existentialism is a Humanism* (2007, 51). Yet the moral concern is still very much present in existentialism: as Kevin Aho explains, 'although [the existentialists] reject the idea of moral absolutes and universalizing judgments about right conduct, existentialism should not be dismissed for promoting moral nihilism' (2023). Simone de Beauvoir, for example, re-interprets the 'omnipermission' caused by the death of God as a condition which in fact increases responsibility, rather than diminishing it: 'if God does not exist, man's faults are inexpiable' (Beauvoir 2018, 11).[151] However partly contradictory, such is the effort of existentialism, which is part of the same greater effort to escape absurdity. Leopardi interprets nothingness as lack of necessity, and thus as infinite possibility: the further step of 20th-century existentialism is to translate this statement from the ontological plane to the practical one: if there is no original necessity for me to *be* thus or thus, then there is no necessity for me to *act* thus or thus: therefore, I am condemned to be free (see Sartre 2007).

[150] '"Nichts ist wahr, Alles ist erlaubt"... Wohlan, *das* war *Freiheit* des Geistes' (Nietzsche 2021, vol. V, part III, § 24). This is reiterated as a self-quotation in *Also sprach Zarathustra*, IV, Der Schatten.
[151] 'si Dieu n'existe pas, les fautes de l'homme sont inexpiables' (Beauvoir 1947, 23).

9. Replies to objections

The most significant objections to Leopardi's existentialism appear in David Jérôme's *Introduction au Zibaldone de Giacomo Leopardi* (2021), which epitomises the criticism many readers might express. Jérôme comes remarkably close to labelling Leopardi as an existentialist, noting that 'l'existence précède toujours l'essence chez Leopardi' (2021, 166), yet he ultimately resists:

> Leopardi n'est pas un précurseur de l'existentialisme. L'existence en question n'est ni nausée, ni absurdité, ni ce à quoi incomberait la tâche de poser la question de l'être. De façon générale, l'existence n'est pas une affaire spécifiquement humaine (2021, 253).

Let us address each objection individually:

1. 'L'existence en question n'est [pas] nausée'.

   Leopardi does not use the term 'nausea' in any explicitly philosophical sense, yet the feeling of nothingness and meaninglessness that the term denotes in Sartre is in all respects present in Leopardi, mainly in the concept of 'noia', as I have shown above. Sartre himself often uses nausea and boredom as essentially synonymous (see Sartre 2020, 6 and 2000, 226), further reinforcing this alignment.[152]

2. 'ni absurdité'.

   This objection is even less tenable. Leopardi explicitly describes existence as 'un assurdo' (*Zib*. 273. 14 ottobre 1820), and the theme of absurdity permeates his work under this very name. Moreover, scholars have already extensively acknowledged and studied the notion of absurd in Leopardi (see at least Jonard 1974; Capitano 2016; Clemente 2020).

3. 'ni ce à quoi incomberait la tâche de poser la question de l'être'.

[152] This was discussed above in section 3.1.

Leopardi is very explicit about the fact the human being is the only being who has the burden of the question of its own being. One passage for all: 'Ed io che sono?' (*Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia*, l. 82), where the shepherd asks himself exactly what kind of being he is. The point of the *Canto notturno* is exactly that the shepherd is 'condemned' to ask himself questions like that whilst the sheep can just rest blessed. This nuance, subtle but crucial in Leopardi, appears to be overlooked in Jérôme's work.[153]

4. 'De façon générale, l'existence n'est pas une affaire spécifiquement humaine'. This is the most serious objection, but the conceptual tools required to address it properly are analysed in Chapter 2. This objection is therefore answered in Chapter 2, section 7.3.

[153] This and other issues of the *Canto notturno* are further investigated below.

10. Conclusion

Leopardi's philosophy is one of the first to articulate the fundamental principle of existentialism: 'existence precedes essence'. This idea is not just hinted at: it is stated explicitly and developed with philosophical consistency. From his ontology of contingency to his ethics and aesthetics devoid of absolutes, Leopardi's thought unfolds entirely from this principle. The core concepts of existentialism – nothingness, absurdity, boredom, anguish, and despair – are not merely anticipated in his work: they are given one of their first coherent formulations, alongside those of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Leopardi's philosophy inaugurates a new way of thinking about the human condition, one that rejects predetermined essence, denies metaphysical necessity, and confronts the need to create meaning in a meaningless world. To understand existentialism at its roots, we need to take Leopardi into account.

2. *The Human Being as Infinite Possibility*

Abstract

Applied to the case of the human being, the existentialist principle entails that human beings do not have a fixed essence – in this sense they are 'nothing', as Leopardi, and Sartre, often claim. The essence of human beings lies instead in their possibility to be infinite things, which in turn entails that human beings are radically free. The existentialist principle also excludes God as the First Cause. Even from the perspective of Leopardi's other writings and personal life, faith in God does not seem to be his solution to the pain of existence. Leopardi should thus be considered the initiator of atheistic existentialism, in the way Kierkegaard is considered the initiator of religious existentialism.

Bene ferre magnam / disce fortunam; tua sectus orbis / nomina ducet.
Learn to bear your great fortune well: a part of the world will carry your name.
(Horace, *Carmina*)

1. Application to anthropology: 'l'uomo è nulla'

Human beings are nothing in two ways: they are unhappy, and they lack a fixed essence.

One of the most striking characterisations of the human being in Leopardi's oeuvre is the statement 'l'uomo è nulla'.[154] This statement can, of course, be interpreted cosmologically: 'human beings are nothing compared with the vastness of the universe'. This reading is certainly valid, but there is another layer of meaning to appreciate. 'L'uomo è nulla' can also be interpreted eudaimonically: 'human beings are nothing because they lack their proper end – happiness'. As the *Cantico del gallo silvestre* says, 'certo l'ultima causa dell'essere non è la felicità; perocchè niuna cosa è felice' (*Cantico del gallo silvestre*, 471). Here, 'ultima causa' is intended in the Aristotelian sense of 'final cause', i.e., purpose. The passage continues:

> le creature animate si propongono questo fine [*sc*. la felicità] in ciascuna opera loro; ma da niuna l'ottengono: e in tutta la loro vita, ingegnandosi, adoperandosi e penando sempre, non patiscono veramente per altro, e non si affaticano, se non per giungere a questo solo intento della natura, che è la morte (*Cantico del gallo silvestre*, ibid.).

Human beings are nothing because all their efforts come to nothing: they are nothing because their existence is meaningless. The universe is not merely a spatial vastness in which humanity is dwarfed, but a eudaimonic reference point – the wielder of infinite unhappiness against which humans' infinite desire of pleasure clashes. In the *Zibaldone*, Leopardi unfolds his argument more widely. By gathering its various parts, one can derive the following syllogism:

1. something *is* if and only if it possesses its perfection (see *Zib*. 4100);[155]

[154] In this exact formulation, it appears in *La ginestra*: 'questo / Globo ove l'uomo è nulla' (ll. 172-73).
[155] 'essere per necessità imperfettamente, cioè con esistenza non vera e propria' (*Zib*. 4100. 2 giugno 1824).

2. human beings do not possess their perfection, i.e., happiness (see *Zib*. 1555-56; 4099);[156]
3. therefore, human beings *are not*.

The only way to justify this paradoxical conclusion is by asserting that the principle of non-contradiction (PNC) does not apply to human beings.

1.1 The PNC does not apply to human beings

When applied to human beings, the existentialist principle entails that they have no pre-existing essence – which brings Leopardi to claim that the PNC does not apply to them.

If their essence is happiness, and they are not happy, then they have no essence, i.e., they are not what they are. This does not mean that they cease to exist, but that they lack an essence. The first premise – something *is* if and only if it possesses its perfection – may seem unusual, but this is Leopardi's interpretation of the Thomistic notion that the being of humans is not perfect because essence and existence do not coincide in them – as they do in God. For St. Thomas, this means that human beings *are*, but they may cease to be; God, by contrast, *is* necessarily and will always be.[157] Leopardi rewrites St. Thomas's view by asserting that human essence is not merely imperfect but contradictory: 'essere – infelicità, cose contraddittorie' (*Zib*. 4129. 5-6 aprile 1825). Leopardi's argument rests on what is in fact the most poetic definition of being of Western philosophy: where Hume says 'being is a flux of perceptions', and Berkeley says 'being is being perceived', Leopardi says 'being is being happy'. The argument thus reads:

[156] 'or l'essere, unito all'infelicità, ed unitovi necessariamente e per propria essenza, è cosa contraria dirittamente a se stessa, alla perfezione e al fine proprio che è la sola felicità' (*Zib*. 4099. 2 giugno 1824).
[157] Aquinas lays out these ideas in his *De ente et essentia* and in *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 3, a. 4.

1. being is being happy;
2. human beings are (exist), but are not happy;
3. therefore, they are and are not, i.e., the PNC does not apply to them.

The contradiction Leopardi is seeking to express is not so much logical, but rather existential: human beings are a kind of being who, by nature, aims at an unachievable goal. Their happiness, which is their essence, always lies ahead of them, unattainable: they are pure desire. As Massimo Donà writes, in Leopardi's philosophy human beings are 'sostanzialmente inadeguati alla propria essenza' (2013, 138). Thus, a eudaimonic failure – human beings are unhappy – generates an ontological contradiction: human beings are nothing. So it happens that the moral determines the ontological – a rare move in Western philosophy, and a unique feature of Leopardi's existentialism.

Sartre too denies the applicability of the PNC to human beings, claiming that it only applies to being-in-itself (unconscious beings such as objects): 'the being of the for-itself is defined, on the contrary, as being what it is not and not being what it is' (2020, 27).[158] With his provocative definition, Sartre means that human beings are always free to change their essence, which makes the notion of a fixed 'essence' – 'I am this and that' – inapplicable. This also follows from self-consciousness: human beings are the only self-conscious beings; but consciousness is always consciousness of something, Sartre claims following Husserl. This means that 'consciousness is born *bearing on* a being that it is not' (Sartre 2020, 22; italics in the original).[159] If I am conscious *of* myself, it means that I am in some way detached from myself; and, in that way, I am not myself: 'the being of consciousness […] is to exist at *a distance from itself*, as self-presence, and this zero distance that being bears within its being is Nothingness' (Sartre 2020, 128; italics in the

[158] 'l'être du *pour soi* se définit au contraire comme étant ce qu'il n'est pas et n'étant pas ce qu'il est' (Sartre 1943, 32). Here, I consider the principle of identity and the PNC together, following Severino 2021, 7.
[159] 'la conscience naît *portée sur* un être qui n'est pas elle' (Sartre 1943, 28; italics in the original).

original).[160] Therefore, the PNC does not apply to conscious beings, which is to say to human beings.

1.2 Human nature and the human condition

Central to both Leopardi and the existentialists is the distinction between 'human nature' and 'the human condition'.[161] Human nature refers to the intrinsic qualities that are supposed to be found in all human beings, regardless of historical and geographical contexts; the human condition is the existential situation into which human beings are thrown. For Leopardi and Sartre, there are no intrinsic qualities that define what a human being is once and for all, 'perchè l'uomo è indefinitamente variabile negl'individui, e l'individuo stesso per se' (*Zib*. 3468. 19 settembre 1823).[162] What defines human beings is rather the possibility of being in many ways – what Leopardi calls 'conformabilità' (*Zib*. 1452).

The human condition is the existential situation that human beings are called to live into, and, contrary to human nature, is indeed universal.[163] For Leopardi and the existentialists, the human condition is intrinsically tragic. In *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre defines it as the '*limitations* that a priori define man's fundamental situation in the universe'; such limitations are 'the necessity for him to be in the world,

[160] 'L'être de la conscience […] c'est d'exister *à distance de soi* comme présence à soi et cette distance nulle que l'être porte dans son être, c'est le Néant' (Sartre 1943, 114; italics in the original). For a full account of the issue in Sartre see Gardner 2009, 114 ff.
[161] The phrase 'condizione umana' occurs three times in the *Operette* (*Natura e Islandese*, *Plotino e Porfirio*, *Timandro ed Eleandro*) and passim in the *Zibaldone* (see e.g. *Zib*. 66, 358, 618, 1979, 1980). At other times Leopardi speaks of 'stato' instead of 'condizione', but with the same meaning. Its immutability and universality are affirmed many times, but see in particular *Zib*. 2555. On the notion of 'human condition' in Leopardi see also Jonard 1974 and Luporini 1996, 108 ff.
[162] Sartre claims the same in *Existentialism is a Humanism* (2007, 42).
[163] The phrase 'human condition' is especially relevant in existentialism thanks to André Malraux's novel *La condition humaine* (1933), usually translated into English, not unproblematically, as *Man's Fate*.

to work in it, to live out his life in it among others, and, eventually, to die' (Sartre 2007, 42; italics in the original).[164] The human condition is thus a collection of lacks: a lack of a stable being, a lack of eternity, and a lack of happiness.[165]

In their writings, Leopardi and Sartre understand 'essence' in the Scholastic sense as the set of qualities that define a being (see Abbagnano 1971, s.v. 'essenza').[166] To the Scholastic definition, however, they add the variable of purpose: essence is the set of qualities a being possesses in order to fulfil its purpose. This is what allows to neatly distinguish objects from people. For objects, essence precedes existence: their essence and purpose are determined a priori for them. Sartre makes the example of a paperknife (2007, 21), arguing that objects are crafted by the artisan according to a pre-existing idea of what the object needs to look like, a set of qualities the object must display in order to serve a predetermined purpose: in the case of a paperknife, cutting paper. This is not the case for the human being. Because in humans existence precedes essence, people begin their existence before knowing what they are supposed to be. Sartre writes: 'when we think of God the Creator, […] each individual man is the realization of a certain concept within the divine intelligence', much like the paperknife in the mind of the artisan (2007, 21).[167] That the innate idea of 'The Human Being' is a concept within the divine intelligence was St. Augustine's belief, and it is no coincidence that Leopardi, immediately after his existentialist conclusion in *Zib*. 1616, mentions a passage by Augustine where innate ideas in the divine intelligence are discussed (see *Zib*. 1616).

[164] 'l'ensemble des *limites* a priori qui esquissent sa situation fondamentale dans l'univers, […] la nécessité pour lui d'être dans le monde, d'y être au travail, d'y être au milieu d'autres et d'y être mortel' (Sartre 1966, 68; italics in the original).
[165] Someone might object that Leopardi does sometimes use the phrase 'human nature' ('natura umana') with the apparent implication of its universal stability. I respond to this possible objection at 7.1.
[166] Cf. *Zib*. 1600.
[167] 'Lorsque nous concevons un Dieu créateur, […] l'homme individuel réalise un certain concept qui est dans l'entendement divin' (1966, 19-20).

Leopardi and Sartre both react to Augustine's view.[168] After all, Augustine's move is to transfer Plato's innate ideas from the Hyperuranion into God's mind. One thus understands that Sartre's existentialism, like Leopardi's, only makes sense against the backdrop of atheism.[169] Human beings come into existence with no defined being, but only with possibilities of being in different ways. Their existence precedes their essence. This is what Sartre means when he claims that 'the human being's essence is in suspense in his freedom' (Sartre 2020, 61),[170] implying that human beings are perpetually free to change their essence.

Contrary to Sartre's position, however, for Leopardi the fact that human beings lack a fixed essence is more of a historical outcome, caused by the repeated use of reason. As a result,

> l'uomo perde quanto è possibile l'impronta della natura. Perduta questa, ch'è la sola cosa stabile nel mondo, la sola universale, o comune al genere o specie, non v'ha altra regola, filo, canone, tipo, forma, che possa essere stabile e comune, alla quale tutti gl'individui agguagliandosi, sieno conformi tra loro (*Zib*. 3809. 25-30 ottobre 1823).

This brings us to the crucial point of this chapter: 'è proprietà dell'uomo l'acquistare la sua vera proprietà' (*Zib*. 3801. 25-30 ottobre 1823).[171] The only intrinsic feature of human beings is the ability to acquire intrinsic features, as a priori they have none. In this sense there is no such thing as a fixed human nature, or essence. Because there is no pre-existing essence, contradiction is permitted. Sartre ultimately comes to define the human being, as 'a being that is its own nothingness' (Sartre 2020, 59).[172] This view is widely shared

[168] The passage in question is the following: 'ideas are the principal forms or the fixed and unchangeable reasons of things that have themselves not been formed and consequently are eternal, always constituted in the same way and contained in the divine intelligence' (Augustine 2008, 59). The same conception of a God-artisan is to be found in Descartes (*Meditations*, III) and Leibniz (*Monadology*, § 43) – these Sartre has in mind when describing God in these terms (see Sartre 2007, 21). In a way, this conception of God still owes to Plato's Demiurge, which Descartes defends and Leopardi, Nietzsche ([1885] 2021, vol. VI, 321), and Sartre reject.

[169] This is further explored in section 9.

[170] 'L'essence de l'être humain est en suspens dans sa liberté' (Sartre 1943, 60).

[171] Sartre expresses the same view in *Existentialism is a Humanism* (2007, 42 ff.).

[172] 'un être qui est son propre néant' (Sartre 1943, 57). In very similar terms, Merleau-Ponty writes that: 'everything is also contingent in man in the sense that this human way of existing is not guaranteed to each

in existentialist thought. In *What is Metaphysics?* (1929), for example, Heidegger contends that nothingness is the foundation (Ger. *Grund*) of the being of the *Dasein*, since its being is inherently unstable. Abbagnano captures this feature effectively: 'l'essere proprio dell'uomo, in quanto costituito da possibilità, che come tali possono non realizzarsi, e che in ogni caso escludono l'essere completo o totale, […] è il nulla del *tutto* dell'essere' (Abbagnano 1971, s.v. 'nulla'; italics in the original).[173]

Another key difference emerges, however: Leopardi applies this view not only to human beings but to all living beings. He even defends animals from Cartesian mechanistic reduction, rejecting the view that animals are 'purissime macchine' (*Zib*. 438). Leopardi's existentialism is perhaps less of a humanism than Sartre's, in that the human being is less neatly isolated from other living beings than it is in Sartre. At the same time, by no means is this difference so great as to erase the ontological difference between animals and humans. As section 2 explains, human conformability and freedom remain much greater than those of animals.

1.3 The PNC does not apply to existence in general

Leopardi eventually extends the inapplicability of the PNC from the human realm to existence itself. Since all living beings are unhappy, he writes, even the very fundamental laws of reason break down: 'non si può meglio spiegare l'orribile mistero delle cose e

human child through some essence acquired at birth, in the sense that it must be continuously renewed in him through the accidents of the objective body' (2012, 174). That human beings do not have fixed essences is a recurring idea in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. Merleau-Ponty has unfortunately found less space in this project than I would have liked; this is because Sartre's relevance to interpret Leopardi has proved much stronger. Chiara Fenoglio provides some hints towards a first comparison between Leopardi and Merleau-Ponty in Fenoglio 2024.

[173] This is, in a nutshell, Sartre's ontological conception of the human being, which is extensively explained in *Being and Nothingness*. The rejection of the PNC is almost a topos in existentialism. Nietzsche also rejects it in the *Posthumous Fragments* of 1887 and 1888 (see Nietzsche 2003).

della esistenza universale […] che dicendo essere insufficienti ed anche falsi […] i principii stessi fondamentali della nostra ragione' (*Zib*. 4099. 2 giugno 1824). The PNC is thus to be rejected as 'assolutamente falso', given the clear contradictions anyone can observe in existence (ibid.). In vain would detractors try to disprove Leopardi's conclusion by pointing out that some people are in fact happy: unhappiness is not the outcome of a statistical generalisation (e.g. most people are unhappy), but the result of an ontological analysis of the human being. In other words, it is not because human beings are generally unhappy that happiness is impossible, but happiness is structurally impossible because human beings desire the infinite and the infinite does not exist.

The rejection of the PNC contradicts traditional logic, yet, Leopardi contends, it follows with perfect logic simply from observing reality:

> è certissimo che nella natura delle cose si scuoprono mille contraddizioni in mille generi e di mille qualità, non delle apparenti, ma delle dimostrate con tutti i lumi e l'esattezza la più geometrica della metafisica e della logica (*Zib*. 4100. 2 giugno 1824).

These contradictions, Leopardi concludes, are as evident as the PNC itself (ibid.) – a stance also noted by Kant in *Critique of Pure Reason* (1998, B 190 ff.) and Hegel in the *Science of Logic* (2010, § 48). This legacy runs through Nietzsche, Sartre, and modern paraconsistent logicians such as Graham Priest, who writes:

> according to Hegel, perfectly correct reasoning, using legitimate applications of certain concepts, leads to contradiction: the concepts are contradictory. And since a sound argument must have a true conclusion, there must be contradictions which are true (Priest 2006, 3-4).

For Leopardi, however, this is less a call for a new logic (see Priest) than a quiet abandonment of logic altogether. As Alberto Folin notes:

> in Leopardi il principio di identità non è affatto *negato*: è semplicemente abbandonato, irrisolto, perché la domanda ontologica sul male non trova risposta nell'ambito della logica e dunque deve avviarsi per cammini impensati (Folin 2001, 23; italics in the original).[174]

[174] See also Vincieri 2005, 84.

Reason fails to resolve our existential contradiction: we therefore require some other tool to confront it. Existentialism is not much concerned with logic technically understood. Its analyses are much closer to literature than to logic – a feature that can be observed in Leopardi as well. The PNC and logic fail to understand reality because reality is not rational. Only the imagination and the heart 'possono meno imperfettamente contemplare, conoscere, abbracciare, comprendere il tutto della natura' (*Zib*. 3243).[175] From the point of view of logic, one might reasonably argue that Leopardi's critique does not stand, because, as we have seen, he confuses 'being' with 'being happy', which arguably express two different propositions. Only under the assumption that being is being happy does Leopardi's critique stand. Yet therein lies the essence of his critique: it is more poetic than logical, more existential than analytic.

[175] On Leopardi and the PNC, see also Polizzi 2008, 40-45; Martinelli 2003, 198; Ferrucci 1992.

2. What is a human being?

Unlike objects and animals, human beings are condemned to constantly question what they are. This emerges clearly in the Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia, one of the key texts of Leopardi's existentialism.

Among the infinite possibilities available to us, we have pursued our insatiable desire for knowledge through the cultivation of reason. Throughout history, the repeated use of reason has shaped in us a 'second nature': 'l'assuefazione e la ragione hanno fatto in noi un'altra natura' (*Dialogo di Plotino e di Porfirio*, 560).[176]

For Leopardi, human nature as infinite possibility is universal and independent of historical context, but it has emerged most clearly in modernity.[177] He believes that primitive peoples were happier precisely because they used reason less (see *Zib*. passim and Sozzi 1985). Once the basic needs of hunger and shelter were satisfied, however, the need for knowledge began to emerge, pushing humans toward an increasing use of reason. As the supreme tool of knowledge, reason could not help but revealing the nothingness of existence more and more. Leopardi writes that reason 'rende piccoli e vili e da nulla tutti gli oggetti sopra i quali ella si esercita, annulla il grande, il bello, e per così dir la stessa esistenza, è vera madre e cagione del nulla' (*Zib*. 2942. 11 luglio 1823). This annihilation is again not physical but eudaimonic and moral: things are nothing in relation to our happiness. Reason exposes this nothingness by examining reality as it truly is;

[176] See also: 'l'assuefazione è una seconda natura, massime l'assuefazione così radicata, così lunga, e cominciata in sì tenera età, com'è quell'assuefazione (composta d'assuefazioni infinite e diversissime) che ci fa esser tutt'altri che uomini naturali, o conformi alla prima natura dell'uomo, e alla natura generale degli esseri terrestri. Basti dire che volendo con ogni massimo sforzo rimetterci nello stato naturale, non potremmo, nè quanto al fisico, […] nè posto che si potesse quanto al fisico ed esternamente, si potrebbe quanto al morale ed internamente. […] La natura nostra presente è appresso a poco la ragione' (*Zib*. 2402-04. 29 aprile 1822). See also *Zib*. 3364 and passim.

[177] In these reflections, 'infinite' is to be understood as 'indefinitely many', rather than 'truly infinitely many' (see more on this distinction in Leopardi in Costa 2024). It is clear, for example, that I will never be able to become, say, a chair: my possibilities are limited.

without such scrutiny, illusions might still persist and promise happiness. Leopardi advocates a return to this scenario.

This destructive power of reason can already be clearly seen in the story of Adam, Leopardi contends. The original sin of *Genesis* is, for Leopardi, a sin of knowledge (*Zib*. 638. 10 febbraio 1821). Nature could have prevented our happiness but did not, yet we also actively contributed to it with our desire for knowledge and the exercise of reason (*Dialogo di Plotino e di Porfirio*, 562-63). Over time, repeated use of reason has shaped in us a *new nature* – more accurately, a *non-nature*, because it consists of endless possibilities, and thus in the fact of not having a fixed nature. The human being is thus defined in modernity by reason. Leopardi insists, however, that rationality is not the essence of humans, but rather a historical outcome. Essence is conformity with one's nature, and reason is not our nature. Now, if essence is conformity to nature, then the savage and the child – less rational than modern humans – are more human than modern humans, who sometimes resemble more the nature of inanimate beings than the one of human beings. Leopardi thus begins to shape one of the starkest contrasts of his philosophy – the one between reason and nature. We will return to this contrast shortly.

Finally, Leopardi asks himself: 'in che cosa consisterà la perfezione umana? qual sarà la sua essenza? Ogni altro genere di viventi lo sa bene' (*Zib*. 1613. 2 settembre 1821). Note that this question occurs only three pages before the formulation of the existentialist principle (*Zib*. 1616), highlighting how the question of human essence is closely related to the question of whether existence precedes essence or vice versa. Each human being is different from the others, as human beings vary across centuries, cultures, and countries: 'qual è dunque la vera forma umana?' Leopardi asks (*Zib*. 3091. 5 agosto 1823). The term 'form' here has the Aristotelian undertone observed above and coincides with 'essence': 'in che cosa consisterà la perfezione umana? qual sarà la sua essenza?' (*Zib*. 1613). 'Ogni

altro genere di viventi lo sa bene': the other classes of living beings know what their essence is. And this is because they have intrinsic, unchangeable features, rather than possibilities.

The ontological difference between human beings and animals is clearly expressed in the *Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia* (1829-30). The sheep rests 'blessed' (tr. Galassi in Leopardi 2010, l. 105), seemingly content because it knows its essence – or at least seems untroubled by the question about it. The shepherd, by contrast, is anguished by the question about his essence: 'Ed io che sono?' (l. 89). Notably, he does not say '*chi* sono', as if implying that his problem is solvable within the human realm, nor through an introspective search for an identity *à la* Augustine. He asks '*che* sono?' '*what* am I?'. This question refers to the *quid* of the human being, it is asking: what is the essence of the human being? what kind of being is it? As Bortolo Martinelli remarks, Leopardi's question is 'che sono' rather than 'chi sono' because it is philosophical, and probably inspired by Descartes' *Second Metaphysical Meditation* (1641), where the French thinker asks himself precisely: 'What am I?' (see Descartes 1984, vol. II, passim).[178] On this question 'si impernia l'inchiesta centrale del *Canto notturno*' (Martinelli 2003, 254). Alongside Descartes' *Meditations*, Paola Cori (2012, 73) analyses another important source of the *Canto notturno*: Antonio Genovesi's *Meditazioni filosofiche sulla religione e sulla morale* (1758), which Leopardi mentions in the *Zibaldone* (3510-14). Genovesi's *Meditations* are divided into three main questions: 'chi son io?'; 'da dove son io?'; 'da chi son io?', but they are answered in a radically different way than Leopardi's: 'Leopardi replaces Genovesi's comforting belief in human superiority with the anguish of being part of a system of destruction, suffered equally by

[178] Lat. 'quid igitur sum?'.

all creatures' (Cori 2012, 75). Cori offers a remarkable instance of how Leopardi deals with questions that aired already in his and previous intellectual environments, and yet comes up with radically new answers, which are the answers of atheistic existentialism.

William Barrett identifies the shift typical of existentialism in St. Augustine: 'where Plato and Aristotle had asked […] "What is man?", St. Augustine […] asks "Who am I?"' (Barrett 1962, 95). Leopardi's question falls somewhat in the middle of the two, maintaining both the subjective element and the universal stance. Frank Rosengarten describes the shepherd's voice as 'one of existential angst, of a desperate search for the meaning of things' (2012, 37). The essence of animals is fixed; human beings, on the contrary, are condemned to constantly put their essence in question. Animals, on the contrary, are happy precisely because they do not think – the sheep is 'blessed', unaware of its nothingness: it does not ask itself what is its essence, and, as far as we can tell, it appears completely unaware of its future death. The answer to 'ed io che sono?' (*Canto notturno*, l. 89) is therefore 'l'uomo è nulla' (*La ginestra*, l. 173); and the answer to 'in che cosa consisterà la perfezione umana? qual sarà la sua essenza?' is that 'non sapremo mai in eterno che cosa e quale propriamente debba esser l'uomo' because 'tutto è incerto e manca di norma e di modello' (*Zib*. 1613). There is no such thing as a fixed human nature.

The *Canto notturno* may have reached the existentialists directly, and it certainly reached them indirectly through Nietzsche. The poem circulated widely through French and German translations already in the 19th century. Friedrich Heinrich Bothe translated it into German in as early as 1832 and published it in *Altes und Neues für Geschichte und Dichtkunst* (1832), as reported by De Sinner in a letter to Leopardi (1st June 1832, in Leopardi 1998a). The first French translation is included in Valery Vernier's *Leopardi traduit de l'italien* (1867), followed by François-Alphonse Aulard's version (1880), and

Auguste Lacaussade's (1889).[179] As Cesare Galimberti has shown (in Nietzsche 1992, 119 ff.), the *Canto notturno* is probably the major source of Nietzsche's second *Untimely Meditation* (1874). The idea that seems to have fascinated Nietzsche the most, and that he integrated into his own text, is precisely the uniqueness of the human condition and the tragic difference between humans and animals, who appear untroubled by life. Through Nietzsche's text, therefore, the *Canto notturno* came to influence, albeit indirectly, the major existentialists in the ways described in the Introduction.

Seen from the existentialist perspective, Leopardi's poem takes on an especially profound weight. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), for example, Camus writes:

> If I were a tree among trees, a cat among animals, this life would have a meaning or rather this problem would not arise, for I should belong to this world. I should *be* this world to which I am now opposed by my whole consciousness and my whole insistence upon familiarity (Camus 1975, 51; italics in the original).[180]

For the animal, the problem of the meaning of life simply does not arise. This problem receives a much fuller treatment in Heidegger's *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (1929), where he distinguishes between inanimate objects, animals, and human beings, famously arguing that the stone is 'worldless', the animal is merely in the world, whereas the human being is 'world-forming' (see Heidegger 1995, § 42). A new genealogy of this notion can be quite clearly traced from the *Canto notturno* (1830), through Nietzsche's second *Untimely Meditation* (1874), to Heidegger's *Being and Time* ([1927] see Heidegger 1996, § 2) and *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (1929), up to Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* ([1943] see Sartre 2020, 23).

[179] For further details see Veronese 2008 and Crivelli 2020.
[180] Si j'étais arbre parmi les arbres, chat parmi les animaux, cette vie aurait un sens ou plutôt ce problème n'en aurait point car je serais partie de ce monde. Je *serais* ce monde auquel je m'oppose maintenant par toute ma conscience et par toute mon exigence de familiarité (Camus 1981, 74; italics in the original).

3. The human being as lack of being

The human being is nothing also in the sense that it lacks stable, absolute being.

In Sartre's philosophy, the human being is fundamentally defined by the lack of stable, infinite being, like the being of God. Human consciousness – the for-itself – is pure negativity that seeks to become an in-itself – an object which coincides with itself, an object with a fixed essence. Yet the human for-itself seeks to become an in-itself while still remaining conscious of its own being. The human being is therefore a for-itself that seeks to become an in-itself-for-itself (Sartre 2020, passim). In Sartre's ontology, however, this is an unattainable ideal, since the for-itself can never become an in-itself and remain conscious, as consciousness implies a separation from the object we are conscious of: in-itself and for-itself are mutually exclusive. Sartre designates this unattainable ideal of an in-itself-for-itself as 'God' (Sartre 2020, 735); thus, 'man is fundamentally the desire to be God' (ibid.).[181] This can be considered another existentialist definition of the human being. For Sartre, as Christina Howells argues, desiring the impossible is what makes us truly human (Howells 2000, 95). This notion is not only present in Leopardi: it is quintessentially his.

An excellent starting point to address virtually every aspect of Leopardi's thought is the theory of pleasure, as it articulates his strongest desire (the infinite), and his deepest fear (the ending of things). Human unhappiness, he argues, arises from the structural mismatch between our innate desire for the infinite and the finiteness of existence. Even if one's life were filled with joy, one would still be unhappy, because such joy would still be temporally finite (see *Zib*. 166). Human beings are not unhappy by accident, but by

[181] 'l'homme est fondamentalement désir d'être Dieu' (Sartre 1943, 612).

necessity. The necessity of this conclusion leads to a crucial question: how can a finite being harbour an infinite desire? This is central to understanding Leopardi. To this question, he replies that we do not seek a 'true' infinite, but only an 'indefinite' – i.e., an object without perceivable limits (*Zib*. 647 and passim). However, as I have argued elsewhere (Costa 2024), even this indefinite proves insufficient: indeed, the indefinite exists, we can experience it, and yet it does not make us happy. If we truly only desired the indefinite, it would suffice to multiply finite pleasures, as happens in the *Storia del genere umano*, where Jupiter indefinitely expands the limits of Earth, creating seas, mountains, and so forth. Yet even then, after a little while, humans were again unhappy. In *Zibaldone* 165-66, Leopardi illustrates that particular pleasures are mere surrogates for the truly infinite pleasure. As soon as we realise how inadequate a substitute the finite pleasure is for the true infinite, we dismiss it with frustration. We consistently make the great yet unavoidable mistake of seeking the infinite in finite things. This is how existence holds us in check. The immense variety of the world conjures the indefinite, but we know that is just a series of finites. Satisfaction eludes us. When we do experience the indefinitely long series of finites, we end up thinking: is this it? it this the pleasure I was expecting? 'Questo è quel mondo? Questi / i diletti, l'amor, l'opre, gli eventi, / onde cotanto ragionammo insieme?' (*A Silvia*, ll. 56-58).[182] And even when we do not desire anything specific, a certain tedium plagues us. 'E pur nulla non bramo' (l. 122) says the shepherd: I do not desire anything specific, anything determinate; I want the indeterminate, i.e., the infinite. The desire of the infinite is the counterpart of anguish. Just like anguish is fear of nothing specific, i.e., of nothingness, likewise the desire for the infinite is desire of nothing specific, i.e., the infinite. The shepherd's thinking goes

[182] That we actually desire the true infinite and not the indefinite is my thesis in Costa 2024.

on: 'Forse s'avess'io l'ale / Da volar su le nubi, / E noverar le stelle ad una ad una, / O come il tuono errar di giogo in giogo, / Più felice sarei (ll. 133-137)'. If only I could experience the indefinite – says the shepherd – I would be happy. Yet he quickly realises that no, he needs the true infinite. But Leopardi does not believe in it, and he declares the tragic character of existence. Human beings seem universally condemned to simultaneously desire and lack the infinite. And since no being is real being if it is not infinite (a corollary of the theory of pleasure) human beings lack being too, or, which is the same, human essence is nothingness. Leopardi insists that we only desire the indefinite, but he fools himself. The indefinite is right there in front of us – in the infinite seas, the infinite places to visit, countless activities to do – who can do everything that can possibly be done in a lifetime? But that is not enough. Yet, make no mistake, this is a problem of quality, not quantity. The quantity of 'things to do' is indefinite – the indefinite is by all means available to us. The fact is that we desire the true infinite. Thus, the question remains unanswered: how can a finite being harbour an infinite desire? Leopardi does not provide a satisfying answer. Kierkegaard's answer – we harbour an infinite desire because an Infinite Being gave it to us – though still problematic, has the merit of providing an origin of our desire and giving existence some meaning.

Sartre re-interprets this whole dynamic ontologically, framing it in terms of self-coincidence. For Sartre, self-coincidence is impossible because, even when our desire is fulfilled, consciousness has already moved beyond it, generating new desires, and thus new lacks. Sartre seems to be responding directly to Leopardi in his account of disillusionment: 'the famous "Is that all it is?" […] does not target the concrete pleasure of satisfaction, but the evanescence of self-coincidence' (2020, 158).[183] Desire and pain,

[183] 'le fameux : "N'est-ce que cela?" […] ne vise pas le plaisir concret que donne l'assouvissement, mais l'évanescence de la coïncidence avec soi' (1943, 138).

Sartre argues, testify to the for-itself as lack (2020, 94-99). According to Sebastian Gardner, Sartre is here deliberately referencing 'Schopenhauer's thesis of the necessity and ubiquity of human suffering' (2009, 105). It is hard to pinpoint which passage of Schopenhauer's works Sartre would explicitly refer to. Chapter 46 of the third volume of *The World as Will and Representation*, however, titled *On the Nothingness and Suffering of Life*, makes a perfectly decent candidate, expressing that 'everything in life proclaims that earthly happiness is ordained to be in vain or recognized as an illusion' (Norman, Welchman, and Janaway in Schopenhauer 2014, 588). This is a potential link between Leopardi and Sartre, via Schopenhauer, who, as mentioned above, recognises Leopardi's influence on himself in the famous supplement to that chapter.[184]

Returning to Leopardi, a major equivalence in his work is to be noted: philosophically speaking, the true Infinite, infinite pleasure, true happiness, the ideal Lady of *Alla sua donna*, and God coincide. They are all images of true, stable, and infinite being, which coincides with true, stable, and infinite happiness. In the manuscripts of the first editions of the *Canti*, *L'infinito* is still in the uppercase, perhaps denoting a higher metaphysical status; and yet we know that for Leopardi the true Infinite does not exist (*Zib*. 4178 and passim);[185] the ideal Lady of *Alla sua donna* is perfect, like Platonic eternal ideas, but she does not exist; God is stable, He is His essence (as Aquinas writes), but He does not exist either. These perfect yet non-existent ideals are often physically represented by the moon, which functions often in Leopardi's texts as the physical representative of perfection. Indeed, the moon is often described with adjectives of stability and perfection such as: 'aurea' (*Inno ai patriarchi*, l. 34); 'queta' (*La sera del dì di festa*, l. 2); 'serena' (*La sera del dì di festa*, l. 4); 'candida' (*Bruto minore*, l. 77); 'vergine' (*Canto notturno*, l. 37);

[184] Sartre read Schopenhauer's masterpiece in the 1877 German edition edited by Julius Frauenstädt (Dassonneville 2018): the passage on Leopardi is included in Schopenhauer 1877, vol. III, 675.
[185] The 'i' is in the uppercase from An to B26; from F31 the 'i' is in the lowercase.

'intatta' (*Canto notturno*, l. 57); 'eterna' (*Canto notturno*, l. 61). The 'setting of the moon' in *Il tramonto della luna* is thus the setting of all that is good on Earth. The same status of perfection and inexistence applies to true pleasure/happiness (*Zib*. 165 ff.; *Zib*. 4175 and passim); absolute good (*Zib*. 391); absolute truth (*Zib*. 661; *Zib*. 1342); innate ideas (*Zib*. 1339); true love (love is defined 'di nostra vita ultimo inganno' in *Ad Angelo Mai* [l. 129]). In general, for Leopardi, anything absolute, perfect, and independent from existence does not exist by definition.[186]

Contrary to the Infinite and God, human beings exist, but, for this very reason, there is nothing absolute, perfect, or prior to existence about them. The inexistence of what would confer real being to human beings inevitably produces an 'inutile disperazione' (*Zib*. 4105): because the Infinite/God does not exist, the human being 'sempre desidera invano' (*Zib*. 3876. 13 novembre 1823). The conclusion of *Being and Nothingness* is nearly identical: 'man is a useless passion' (Sartre 2020, 797).[187] These similarities are striking, but make perfect philosophical sense, given that Leopardi and Sartre share the same metaphysical premises. For Leopardi, the human being is lack of being (because she or he dies) and lack of happiness (because life is suffering). These two lacks are in fact one and the same. His longing for the infinite corresponds precisely to Sartre's desire to be the in-itself-for-itself. Both are impossible. Both reveal the tragic nature of the human being, who is defined by the insurmountable gap between what she or he is (nothing) and what she or he seeks (totality, the Infinite). Thus, the human being is indeed a useless passion, and their existence is a doomed pursuit of what they cannot be.

[186] '*la perfezione assoluta,* […] *e l'esistenza, sono termini contraddittorii*' (*Zib*. 1911. 13 ottobre 1821; italics in the original).
[187] 'l'homme est une passion inutile' (Sartre 1943, 662).

4. The *Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia* and Leopardi's existential protest

The existentialist protest against the human condition contributed greatly to shaping the notion of 'humanity' we have today.

I have distinguished between a technical side of existentialism, pioneered by Leopardi, and an emotional side, pioneered by Pascal and Kierkegaard. This section explores how Leopardi contributes to the emotional side as well – that is, how he expresses the question of the meaning of existence poetically.

The problem of the meaning of existence in Leopardi's writings appears now in the form of a philosophical question about the human condition, now of a protest against it (Binni 1973), now of a complaint toward it (Nietzsche [1887-88] 2021, vol. VIII, 2, 331). Nietzsche, for example, writes: 'Leopardi complains, and his complaint has grounds: yet, in doing so, he does not belong to the perfect type of nihilist' (Nietzsche 1887-88; my transl.).[188] This famous judgement suggests that in Leopardi the moment of protest prevails over that of resignation, whereas Nietzsche believes the latter should prevail. Scholars have traditionally seen Leopardi's complaint embodied in boredom and anguish, thereby arguing for his 'modernity' and 'untimeliness' (Capitano 2016 et al.). Yet how could we call these elements 'modern' or 'untimely' if existentialism had not come afterwards?

The foremost text for investigating the problem of the meaning of existence is certainly once again the *Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia*. It is no coincidence that this poem contains the largest number of questions among all of Leopardi's *Canti*. Even

[188] 'Leopardi beklagt sich, hat Grund sich zu beklagen: aber damit gehört er nicht zu dem vollkommenen Typus des Nihilisten' (Nietzsche 2021, vol. VIII, 2, 331-32). This passage is not included in the English editions of the *Posthumous Fragments* currently available.

qualitatively, the questions in this poem rank among the most profound in all of Leopardi's work. This text is especially important for the Italian existentialists Giuseppe Capograssi (2008, 170 and passim) and Luigi Pareyson. The latter, in particular, discusses the *Canto notturno* in one of his major works, *Ontologia della libertà*, comparing Leopardi to Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, and Heidegger (Pareyson 1995, 354).

In the text, the shepherd addresses the moon and asks: 'Dimmi, o luna: a che vale / Al pastor la sua vita […]?' (ll. 16-18) The shepherd seems to be asking: what is the value of existence? What is the point of living? I can safely argue that this is the central question of existentialism. An excellent passage to support this claim is the beginning of *The Myth of Sisyphus*: 'there is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy' (Camus 1975, 11).[189] The shepherd feels the need to ask someone else about the meaning of his life. He asks the moon, since the moon, in this text and in the *Canti* in general, is nothing other than the last hypostasis of the absolute, or – which is the same – of God as the absolute source of meaning. Does Leopardi forget that many years earlier he had already declared the inexistence of the absolute (*Zib*. 1339 ff. 17 luglio 1821)? He remembers, yet the *Canto notturno* is poetry, which allows him to represent the illusion of the absolute. Leopardi thus takes up the old habit of addressing a supernatural being to seek existential guidance. This becomes apparent in questions such as the following: 'dimmi: ove tende / Questo vagar mio breve, / Il tuo corso immortale?' (ll. 18-20) The shepherd wants to derive the meaning of his existence from an immortal source: he obstinately seeks to derive the contingent from the necessary. What follows in the text is the *mise en abyme* of Leopardi's conception of existence, in which an old man,

[189] 'Il n'y a qu'un problème philosophique vraiment sérieux : c'est le suicide. Juger que la vie vaut ou ne vaut pas la peine d'être vécue, c'est répondre à la question fondamentale de la philosophie' (Camus 1981, 15).

at the end of his meaningless life, falls into the terrible abyss of nothingness – 'Tale / è la vita mortale' (ll. 37-38) repeats the shepherd. The definitiveness of this statement seems reinforced by its rhyme in '-ale' at the end of each stanza, perhaps to remark the universality of the human condition. After that, the shepherd finally realises the infinite gap between the mortal and the immortal: 'ma tu mortal non sei, / E forse del mio dir poco ti cale' (ll. 59-60). No help is coming from the absolute, if it exists at all. And yet, the next stanza opens with one of the most meaningful stylistic devices of Leopardi's work, the concessive subordinate, which starts a new line of questions, albeit indirect: 'Pur tu, solinga, eterna peregrina, / Che sì pensosa sei, tu forse intendi, / Questo viver terreno, / Il patir nostro, il sospirar, che sia' (ll. 61-64).[190] This is what Nietzsche has in mind when he criticises Leopardi's incessant attempt to ask for metaphysical help. Then come the questions: 'A che tante facelle? / Che fa l'aria infinita, e quel profondo / Infinito seren? che vuol dir questa / Solitudine immensa? ed io che sono?' (ll. 86-89) The shepherd clearly expects even natural elements to 'do something', that is, to 'have some meaning in relation to human beings'. The need for meaning could not be more explicit: 'che vuol dir questa / Solitudine immensa?' To such questions, Nietzsche would reply: 'why do you even think it should mean anything? Do you still not realise that existence is meaningless?'. The level of anguish and urgency for meaning that Leopardi's existential protest displays in this poem is perhaps paralleled only by Pascal. If the *Canto notturno* asks, *La ginestra* protests. In that poem, Leopardi defines true nobility as the courage to declare the tragic character of the human condition openly: 'Nobil natura è quella / ch'a sollevar s'ardisce / gli occhi mortali incontra / al comun fato, e che con franca lingua, / nulla al ver detraendo, / confessa il mal che ci fu dato in sorte, / e il basso stato e frale; /

[190] The concessive subordinate is the key of many other relevant texts, including *Il Risorgimento* and the *Dialogo di Plotino e di Porfirio*, where it signals the rebirth of illusions. This is further explored in the third chapter.

quella che grande e forte / mostra sé nel soffrir' (ll. 111–19). The notion of human nobility is a recurring theme in Leopardi's works: 'Natura umana, or come / Se frale in tutto e vile, / Se polve ed ombra sei, tant'alto senti?' (*Sopra il ritratto di una bella donna*, ll. 50-52). Because they lack a fixed essence, human beings are nobler than things with a defined identity. Writes Leopardi: 'niuna cosa maggiormente dimostra […] l'altezza e nobiltà dell'uomo, che il poter l'uomo conoscere e interamente comprendere e fortemente sentire la sua piccolezza [tanto che] si confonde quasi col nulla (*Zib*. 3171. 12 agosto 1823). Human intellectual endeavours, while unable to reach happiness or true being, bear witness to the nobility of the human being – a conclusion on which existentialism insists strongly. For Sartre, the impossibility of defining the human being is proof of human higher dignity: 'man is nothing other than what he makes of himself. This is the first principle of existentialism. […] But what do we mean by that, if not that man has more dignity than a stone or a table?' (2007, 22-23).[191] For Sartre, as for Leopardi, the lack of essence is indeed a deficiency, but it is also the foundation of human freedom and dignity. Ontological nothingness – the impossibility of defining the human being in fixed terms – becomes the ultimate affirmation of human nobility. Being human, existentialists say, is not about *having* a fixed nature, but about *pursuing* one, and shaping our own essence in our own unique way.

[191] 'l'homme n'est rien d'autre que ce qu'il se fait. Tel est le premier principe de l'existentialisme. […] Mais que voulons-nous dire par là, sinon que l'homme a une plus grande dignité que la pierre ou que la table?' (Sartre 1966, 22)

5. Human nature as infinite possibility

Human nature can be infinitely reshaped: human beings do not have 'faculties', but 'dispositions' to be in infinite ways.

For Leopardi, human nature is essentially '*conformabilità*' (*Zib*. 1452; italicised in the original), meaning the possibility to be in indefinitely many ways. Human beings do not have a set of qualities like the paperknife; rather, their only property is the ability to acquire new properties (see *Zib*. 3801). The theory of conformability was developed in the same weeks as the existentialist principle (August 1821 and September 1821 respectively). Rejecting the Platonic idea of 'Human Being' entails that the human being has no model to refer to, and thus no pre-existing essence. As D'Intino observes, Leopardi reacts 'in his own way against what we might call, with Nietzsche, the Platonic invention of the *homo theoreticus*' (D'Intino 2015, 35). Thus, not bound by any pre-existing essence, the human being can be potentially anything: 'ciascun uomo è come una pasta molle, suscettiva d'ogni possibile figura' (*Zib*. 1452. 4 agosto 1821). This idea resonates with a much more ancient text, remarkably close to existentialism though strangely overlooked by the existentialists: Pico della Mirandola's *Oratio de hominis dignitate* (1486). In the text, God describes human beings as 'the free and extraordinary shaper' of themselves (2012, 117) – the only creature without a fixed essence: 'the nature of all other beings is constrained within the laws We [*sc*. God] have prescribed for them. But you, constrained by no limits, may determine your nature for yourself, according to your own free will' (ibid.).[192]

[192] 'tui ipsius quasi arbitrarius honorariusque plastes et fictor'; 'Definita ceteris natura intra praescriptas a nobis leges coercetur. Tu, nullis angustiis coercitus, pro tuo arbitrio, in cuius manu te posui, tibi illam praefinies' (131 v). Leopardi does not mention Pico's *Oratio*, nor was it included in his home library. It is therefore not certain that he read Pico's work.

In his existentialist anthropology, Leopardi abandons Aristotle's definition of the human being as a 'rational animal' in favour of that of 'self-conforming animal', where the *genus proximum* is still 'animal', but the *differentia specifica* is not reason, but the 'possibility to be in indefinitely many ways'.[193] 'L'uomo', he writes, 'è sommamente e infinitamente o indeterminatamente conformabile' (*Zib*. 3467. 19 settembre 1823).[194] The essence of the human being is possibility.[195] Adriano Tilgher is one of the very few scholars to have appreciated Leopardi's new existentialist anthropology. He describes Leopardi's human being as 'un essere che può assumere tutte le forme appunto perché non è legato a nessuna forma fissa e prestabilita, infinitamente libero perché non vincolato a nessuno dei modi in cui si attua, […] che appunto perciò non è veramente essere ma infinita potenzialità di essere' (1940, 97).

Leopardi writes 'infinitinamente' but also 'indeterminatamente conformabile' (*Zib*. 3467). This means, as Alessandra Aloisi remarks, that it is impossible to know a priori which faculties will be acquired from the development of our existing infinite possibilities:

> ciò che a Leopardi interessa dunque mettere in luce […] è soprattutto il *rapporto del tutto indeterminato* tra disposizioni e facoltà […]: le facoltà sono contenute nelle disposizioni non come l'uovo contiene in potenza la gallina, ma appunto come la carta contiene *virtualmente* la possibilità di essere scritta o piegata in più modi diversi (Aloisi 2014, 99; italics in the original).

What we are is the outcome of repeated habits, some chosen, some not. Leopardi mentions the extraordinary faculties developed by the deaf and the blind, emphasising how human

[193] The notion of 'conformabilità' in Leopardi is defined precisely as 'possibility to be in indefinitely many ways'. For this reason, I have chosen to translate the adjective 'conformabile' as 'self-conforming', in order to preserve the nuance of self-shaping inherent in Leopardi's notion of conformability – and, indeed, of freedom. It is important to stress, however, that human conformability is determined neither exclusively by circumstances (otherwise human beings would be 'purissime macchine') nor exclusively by freedom (which is inconceivable). Both external factors *and* human freedom direct it. The same applies to Sartre, who captures the role of external factors with the notion of 'facticity'.

[194] Human conformability is also defined 'massima' in *Zib*. 1568-69, and the modern human being is defined 'infinitamente alterato' in *Zib*. 3804. The convertibility of 'conformabilità' and 'possibilità' is endorsed in *Zib*. 2152.

[195] See also *Zib*. 1456: 'che cosa è l'uomo? Un animale più assuefabile degli altri'.

faculties derive from circumstances and habituation, rather than from conditions set a priori (*Zib*. 1569. 27 agosto 1821).[196] That the human being does not have a specific nature (like the paperknife) but is rather all made of possibilities is also Heidegger's, and Sartre's, belief:

> The characteristics to be found in this being [*sc*. the human being] are thus not objectively present 'attributes' of an objectively present being which has such and such an 'outward appearance', but rather possible ways for it to be, and only this. The thatness of this being is primarily being. Thus the term 'Da-sein' which we use to designate this being does not express its what, as in the case of table, house, tree, but being (Heidegger 1996, § 9).[197]

For Heidegger, Sartre, and Leopardi, there are no such things as faculties in our nature, but only possibilities to acquire faculties: 'nella nostra mente in origine non esiste propriamente nessuna facoltà' (*Zib*. 1662. 10 settembre 1821).[198] The only faculty is habituation: 'l'assuefabilità non è che disposizione. Tuttavia se vogliamo chiamarla facoltà, questa è l'unica facoltà naturale, essenziale, primitiva ed ingenita, che abbia qualunque vivente' (*Zib*. 1828. 3 ottobre 1821). Even reason, which has been treated for centuries as the innate human faculty *par excellence*, is not, for Leopardi, an innate faculty, but an acquired one through its repeated use (*Zib*. 1680).[199] Sartre writes the same in regard to freedom: 'freedom is not a faculty of the human mind that can be

[196] That long-term habituation can shape human nature profoundly was also Montaigne's belief (see Montaigne 2003, I, 23). To demonstrate the power of habituation, Leopardi also makes the example of a boy born with no arms who manages to do everything with his feet. In his *Essais*, Montaigne makes the same example. The very term of 'assuefazione' Leopardi employs might be due to Montaigne's 'accoutumance' (ibid.). For Leopardi's knowledge of Montaigne see D'Intino 2017a and 2017b and Damiani in Leopardi 1987, vol. II, 84.

[197] Die an diesem Seienden herausstellbaren Charaktere sind daher nicht vorhandene 'Eigenschaften' eines so und so 'aussehenden' vorhandenen Seienden, sondern je ihm mögliche Weisen zu sein und nur das. Alles Sosein dieses Seienden ist primär Sein. Daher drückt der Titel 'Dasein', mit dem wir dieses Seiende bezeichnen, nicht sein Was aus, wie Tisch, Haus, Baum, sondern das Sein (Heidegger 1967, § 9).

[198] See also *Zib*. 2028: 'nessuna facoltà esiste primitivamente nell'uomo' (1° novembre 1821). The term 'faculty' is taken by Leopardi in the Aristotelian sense of 'powers of the soul' (*De anima*, part II).

[199] Leopardi's argument is similar to Hume's argument against causality in his *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding* (Hume 2014, 43 ff.). See also Brioschi 2001, 746.

contemplated and described in isolation' (2020, 61).[200] Freedom is, for Sartre, rather the backdrop of possibility upon which virtually any faculty can be developed.

Leopardi distinguishes human beings from objects and animals even further with the introduction of 'disposizioni ad essere' and 'disposizioni a poter essere' (*Zib*. 3374. 6 settembre 1823). 'Dispositions to be' are realised inevitably at some point in one's life and are given by nature. 'Dispositions to be able to be', on the other hand, may or may not be realised in one's life, are not given by nature, and develop from other causes. The theory of dispositions (September 1823) was developed two years after the existentialist principle (September 1821), and can be read as the application of the existentialist principle to the specific case of human beings. It is only sketched by Leopardi, but 'dispositions to be able to be' are crucial for his existentialism. As Luporini writes:

> A differenza di tutti gli altri animali, aveva detto Leopardi, l'uomo non è soltanto 'disposizione ad essere', ma è 'disposizione a poter essere', e in questa differenza credo vada visto il fondamento teorico del suo esistenzialismo (nel senso moderno del termine) ([1938] 1996, 122).

'Dispositions to be' can be seen as first-order possibilities toward a specific end, while 'dispositions to be able to be' can be seen as second-order possibilities toward an indeterminate end, and thus as possibilities of acquiring new and unforeseeable first-order possibilities. As Aloisi has noted (2014, 99), the notion of 'disposition to be able to be' overcomes the Aristotelian notion of potentiality. Potentiality can be actualised in only one determinate direction: the egg is in potentiality the chicken and nothing else – these are Leopardi's dispositions to be. 'Dispositions to be able to be' have an indeterminate end, meaning that their development is unforeseeable a priori. We can thus employ Tilgher's definition of Leopardi's human being as 'infinita potenzialità di essere' (1940,

[200] 'la liberté n'est pas une faculté de l'âme humaine qui pourrait être envisagée et décrite isolément' (Sartre 1943, 59).

97) but we must replace ‘potenzialità’ with ‘possibilità’, in order to acknowledge the element of indeterminacy.

We have seen above that the definition of ‘possible’ as ‘objective possibility’ is the one Abbagnano considers typical of existentialism (1971, s.v. ‘possibile’). Even this definition, however, understands ‘possible’ as developable in only one direction: the uncertainty lies in whether such development will actually take place or not. Leopardi shapes a new notion of ‘possibility’, understood as something which may or may not become real *plus* the unknowability of the object that may be realised. Abbagnano writes that the third sense is the one employed by Kierkegaard and by some existentialists (1971, s.v. ‘possibile’). That is because Kierkegaard’s possibility is ultimately the possibility of accepting or rejecting God: will I do or will I not do what God commands me? This is Kierkegaard’s dilemma. The terms of possibility are set a priori by God. For a possibility to have a truly unforeseeable outcome, the terms of the choice must not have been set a priori by someone else. This is why Leopardi’s notion of possibility appears closer to atheistic existentialism. It is no coincidence that Aristotle’s potentiality is also rejected by Sartre (see 2020, 2 ff. and 1992, 17).

Dispositions to be able to be are typical of human beings; animals mainly have dispositions to be; and objects mainly have unchangeable qualities (like the paperknife). Thus, going from human beings, through animals, down to objects, ‘dispositions to be able to be’ gradually disappear:

> passando ai vegetabili, e quindi scendendo per tutta la catena degli esseri, troverete che le naturali disposizioni sono di mano in mano sempre maggiormente ad essere che a poter essere, cioè si restringono, finchè gradatamente si arrivi a quegli enti ne’ quali la natura non ha posto disposizioni nè ad essere nè a poter essere, ma solo qualità (*Zib*. 3378. 6-7 settembre 1823).

Objects, Leopardi argues, do not have possibilities, but only qualities, meaning that their essence is completely fixed. Their being has been established by nature, so that it is ‘tale

nè più nè meno quale ella intese e ordinò che fosse' (*Zib*. 3379. 6-7 settembre 1823). At the opposite end of the 'chain of being' are human beings, where 'la natura non ha posto di sua mano quasi veruna qualità determinata' (*Zib*. 3379-80. 6-7 settembre 1823). Humans, therefore, in the sense that they do not have determined qualities, do not have an essence. Leopardi's notion of habituation replaces the Platonic one of innatism. Likewise, conformability replaces perfectibility, which 'presuppone […] una fissità della natura umana che consentirebbe di determinare un suo stato di perfezione' (Karp 2016, 27). Perfectibility implies fixity; conformability does not.[201]

Leopardi's existentialist anthropology replaces the traditional features that the Platonic, essentialist tradition had considered intrinsic to the human being: 'perfettibilità' is replaced by 'conformabilità'; 'innatismo' by 'assuefazione'; 'facoltà' by 'disposizioni a poter essere'. These shifts support the broader replacement of essence with existence, since the former are fixed (perfectibility, innatism, faculties), and the latter are by definition in constant change (conformability, habituation, dispositions).

The replacement of essence with existence in 20th-century existentialism occurs in very similar terms. Sartre famously reworks Heidegger's notion that: '*the "essence" of Da-sein lies in its existence*', meaning that the human being is only defined by the mere fact that she or he exists, rather than by a set of defined qualities (Heidegger 1996, § 9; italics in the original).[202] Leopardi, Heidegger, and Sartre write against the same philosophical opponents: 'perfectibility' was a key tenet of Madame de Staël, Rousseau, and the French *idéologues*; 'innatism' was strongly endorsed by Descartes, Leibniz, and the rationalist tradition (traceable back to Plato); 'faculties' go back as far as to Aristotle and are still central in Descartes (see *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* [1701] in Descartes 1984,

[201] When Leopardi deals with the theory of perfectibility, the two main references he has in mind are Madame de Staël and Rousseau (Damiani in Leopardi 1997b, 3376, 3472).
[202] '*Das "Wesen" des Daseins liegt in seiner Existenz*' (Heidegger 1967, § 9; italics in the original).

vol. I, 32 ff.).[203] The replacement of essence with existence is a response to Plato's essentialism, later embodied by Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz.[204] With his theory of conformability and dispositions, Leopardi builds a new conception of the human being where existence precedes essence.

[203] It must be said, however, that Spinoza already (Spinoza 2018, III, proposition XLVIII, sch.) and, especially, Leibniz had refused faculties. In reference to the 'faculty' of understanding, for example, Leibniz writes: 'it is not a bare faculty, consisting in a mere possibility of understanding those truths: it is rather a disposition, an aptitude, a preformation, which determines our soul and brings it about that they are derivable from it' (*New essays on Human Understanding* in Leibniz 1996, I, 80). Leopardi's originality lies in the unheard-of notion of 'disposition to be able to be', and in making it uniquely human. This, however, does not invalidate the general contrast between essentialism and existentialism and their respective representatives.

[204] In Leopardi's early *Dialogo filosofico*, Spinoza is depicted as a negator of free will (see Leopardi 1997a, 731-733). See further Biscuso 2019, 20-22. Later in his career, Leopardi accepts some ideas more or less directly coming from Spinoza, but not necessitarianism.

6. The necessity of freedom

The existentialist principle also entails that human beings are free. Leopardi develops his own theory of freedom, radically different from Kierkegaard's and Nietzsche's.[205]

You've all heard the old saying:
There's no knowing a man's life –
has it been good? has it been bad? –
till he's dead.
(Sophocles 2021, ll. 1-4)[206]

The incipit of Sophocles' *Women of Trachis* lends itself quite aptly to an existentialist reading. If one replaces the Greek notion of 'fate' with the existentialist one of 'freedom', this old saying expresses the core idea of existentialism: there is no knowing a human being's life until they are dead – and that is because they are always free to change it and give it a new meaning. Freedom is the idea existentialism is most famous for, and for good reasons.

The existentialist principle entails that human beings, lacking a pre-existing essence, are necessarily free to create their own themselves. Existentialism understands freedom in the traditional sense as a 'movimento che inizia dal soggetto senza il concorrere di cause esterne' (Abbagnano 1971, s.v. 'libertà'). I will argue that this is how Leopardi understands it, too. Sebastian Gardner proposes the further distinction between 'empirical freedom' and 'ontological freedom': empirical freedom relates to 'the social and historical structures in which the individual finds himself' and is 'the power to reshape them in accordance with her own ends' (2009, 161); ontological freedom, on the other

[205] The title of this section was chosen as a reference to Christina Howells' monograph on Sartre, subtitled 'The Necessity of Freedom' (see Howells 1998).
[206] Λόγος μὲν ἔστ' ἀρχαῖος ἀνθρώπων φανεὶς / ὡς οὐκ ἂν αἰῶν' ἐκμάθοις βροτῶν, πρὶν ἂν / θάνῃ τις, οὔτ' εἰ χρηστὸς οὔτ' εἴ τῳ κακός· (Sophocles 2017, ll. 1-4).

hand, is a 'merely setting herself over and against them [*sc*. social and historical structures]' (ibid.). Ontological freedom should be seen as the transcendental condition (in the Kantian sense) of empirical freedom, i.e. that which precedes and makes empirical freedom possible. Only if I am not determined by anything external (ontological freedom) can I act freely (empirical freedom). This chapter focuses on ontological freedom, understood as a major feature of the human condition. Empirical freedom – the quintessentially existentialist 'self-making' – is explored in Chapter 3.

Leopardi is not typically associated with reflections on freedom, yet there is much to observe when his work is viewed through an existentialist lens. The importance of conformability and habituation in Leopardi's thought has been shown above, but there is a question which usually remains unasked: who or what determines the directions our conformability takes? A necessary chain of causes going from a time t_0 to the present time is to be excluded in Leopardi, since he rejects the notion of a first cause. In Leopardi's worldview, the principle governing things is not necessity, but chance: 'la nostra civiltà […] non è stata opera della natura, non conseguenza necessaria e primordialmente preveduta delle disposizioni da lei prese circa la specie umana […] ma del caso' (*Zib*. 1570-71. 27 agosto 1821). In rejecting the idea that our civilisation is a necessary outcome of nature, Leopardi's target is still necessitarianism. Chance is here understood as lack of necessity, i.e., as contingency. Andrea Malagamba describes Leopardi's theory of conformability as a 'determinismo contingenziale' (2010, 320), which, by being directed by chance, ultimately becomes a form of indeterminism. In the void that Leopardi leaves to chance, Sartre places choice – a step that Leopardi does not take with the same decisiveness.

Yet, the passage from chance to choice can be glimpsed in Leopardi as well. In his study of Leopardi's theory of habituation, Malagamba concludes: 'per sua natura, ogni

individuo è […] persuaso – *salvo le eccezioni del filosofo e dell'uomo di talento* – di non poter esser diverso da com'è' (Malagamba 2010, 316; italics mine). People may think that they are not really free to be different from what they are, but they are wrong. The philosopher knows it, and by their very understanding of the habituation process, they become capable of taking control of it, and thus potentially choosing the directions of their own habituations. Indeed, Leopardi speaks of a 'will to habituate oneself in particular directions', distinguishing between 'assuefazioni che si contraggono da se e spontaneamente, e senza volontà determinata' and 'assuefazioni che ci vengono comunicate, insegnate […] con attenzione e *volontà di assuefarsi*' (*Zib*. 1763. 21 settembre 1821; italics mine). This 'volontà di assuefarsi' indicates that we can indeed choose how our dispositions will develop – that is, make our own choices. The free will to direct our conformability is the only way to explain what the armless boy was able to do: he trained his feet to perform the tasks normally done by hands – a result that could never have come about through chance alone.

6.1 Leopardi's theory of freedom

Throughout the *Zibaldone*, freedom receives much more than this foreshadowing. In fact, freedom plays a greater role in Leopardi's works than has traditionally been recognised. Let us see why.

Leopardi begins to develop his theory of freedom quite early, in December 1820, through a reflection on the book of *Genesis* and the figure of Adam.[207] He starts from the

[207] Interestingly, for their discussion on freedom, Leopardi, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Sartre all employ the example of Adam, probably taken from Leibniz's *Essais de théodicée* (see Leibniz [1710] 1985, 222 ff.) or Pierre Bayle's *Replies to the questions of a provincial* (1703), whom Leibniz discusses extensively. On the figure of Adam in Leopardi see Campana 2010, 323-55.

notion of choice: any being capable of choosing, he argues, must start from pre-existing beliefs about what is good and what is bad (*Zib*. 437-38. 22 dicembre 1820). This does not apply to plants and stones, which are not capable of choosing (ibid.). The only beings capable of choosing are animals (including humans): 'l'animale che dipende da se nell'azione e nella vita, ha bisogno di credere, giacchè non c'è altro motivo nè mobile, nè altra forza, (eccetto l'estrinseche) che lo possa determinare, e definirne la scelta' (*Zib*. 437-38. 22 dicembre 1820).[208] One should note that the word 'scelta' is explicitly used and insisted upon. Leopardi's point is that we must have pre-existing beliefs in order to make choices. Human beings and animals 'dipendono da se nell'azione e nella vita', whereas non-animal beings – such as plants and stones – depend entirely on extrinsic causes and on pre-determined mechanisms.[209] Extrinsic causes (such as hunger [see *Zib*. 443]) do contribute to human actions, but they do not completely account for them.

All these notions – beliefs, independence from external causes, the principle of life being internal or external – are taken from Descartes, with the intent, however, of overcoming the Cartesian notion that animals are just 'purissime macchine' (*Zib*. 438).[210] The passage of interest for this section is Dutens': 'Cartesio […] fu obbligato da una conseguenza necessaria de' suoi principi, di negare il pensiero alle bestie, e sostenere che esse fossero macchine' (Dutens 1789, vol. II, 159). This notion found its way into Leopardi's early *Dissertazione sopra l'anima delle bestie* (1811), where he refutes Descartes' idea that animals are purely mechanistic beings (see Leopardi 1995, 81 ff.). In formulating his theory of freedom, therefore, Leopardi explicitly distances himself from

[208] As Damiani remarks, 'già nella *Dissertazione sopra l'anima delle bestie* quest'ultima era ritenuta "libera" e non limitabile a "un puro meccanismo"' (Damiani in Leopardi 1997b, 3317).
[209] It is noteworthy that animals, too, are conceived by Leopardi as depending on themselves alone for their actions (and thus free): see for example *Zib*. 440.
[210] Leopardi seems to have absorbed Descartes second-hand, as D'Intino and Caesar also argue (in Leopardi 2013, *Zib*. 370n1), as he does not cite Descartes directly but draws on secondary sources like Thomas' *Éloge de Descartes* (1765), and more often Dutens' *Origine delle scoperte attribuite a' moderni* (1789).

Descartes – a notable move, especially because his sources do not mention Descartes' treatment of freedom: it is all Leopardi's own work.[211] Descartes is a key figure for this project because Sartre explicitly invokes him when shaping his own theory of freedom. He writes: 'Descartes, following the Stoics, gave a name to this possibility of human-reality, the possibility of secreting a nothingness that isolates it: it is *freedom*' (2020, 61; italics in the original).[212] Sartre builds his existentialism on this concept of freedom. Both Leopardi and Sartre react to Descartes in shaping their views of freedom: Leopardi by opposing Descartes' mechanistic conception of animals, while Sartre by directly reworking Descartes' notion of freedom.

Leopardi's theory of freedom also includes an explicit rejection of determinism. He specifies that pre-existing beliefs do direct the will, but do not compel action: 'queste [*sc*. le credenze] non tolgono la libertà, perchè non fanno altro che determinare la *volontà*, e non già forzare macchinalmente gli organi' (*Zib*. 439-40. 22 dicembre 1820; italics in the original). Pre-existing beliefs, he concludes, are 'indifferent[i] alla libertà' (ibid.). Sartre would put it this way: there is always an 'écart', a gap, between our beliefs and our actions: in that gap lies my freedom. I may be determined in what I desire by pre-existing beliefs, but I remain free to choose whether or not to pursue my desire. A further, subtler defence of free will appears in the *Discorso sopra lo stato presente dei costumi degl'Italiani* (1824):

> gli usi e costumi generali e pubblici, non sono, come ho detto, se non abitudini, e non sono seguiti che per liberissima volontà, determinata quasi unicamente dalla materiale assuefazione, dall'aver sempre fatta quella tal cosa, […] dal vederla fare agli altri, dal non

[211] The sources are Dutens, Thomas, and Algarotti's *Saggio sopra il Cartesio* ([1754] in Algarotti 1963). Damiani notes that 'di Cartesio Leopardi possedeva *I princìpi della filosofia* e *Le passioni dell'anima*, oltre a un'edizione latina del *Discorso sul metodo*, allineata tra i libri proibiti' (Damiani in Leopardi 1997b, 3289). Leopardi does not seem to engage with Descartes' works where human freedom is treated – *Metaphysical Meditations* and some private letters.

[212] 'Cette possibilité pour la réalité-humaine de sécréter un néant qui l'isole, Descartes, après les Stoïciens, lui a donné un nom : c'est la *liberté*' (Sartre 1943, 59).

> curarsi o non pensare di fare altrimenti o di non farla (al che basterebbe il volere) (Leopardi 2014, 69).

'Al che basterebbe il volere': here, Leopardi clearly claims that our will is always free to act on top of all our long-standing habits. These reflections confirm that human beings are not passive, mechanistic products of habituation: habituation shapes the basis of our being, but we are always free to interrupt it and redirect it. Leopardi makes a final, perhaps most surprising point:

> Considerate l'uomo naturale, il fanciullo ec. e vedrete quante sieno le sue azioni determinate da principii ingeniti […]. P.e. il bambino, applicategli le labbra alla mammella, ne succhia il latte senza maestro. Ma è cosa già osservata, e quanto naturale ad accadere, […] che la forza dell'istinto, scema in proporzione che crescono le altre forze determinatrici dell'uomo, cioè la ragione e la cognizione (*Zib*. 440-41. 22 dicembre 1820).

When we grow up, we can no longer use the excuse of 'natural instincts' – we must act freely using reason and knowledge. Thus, as reason strengthens and knowledge increases with age, so does our freedom. Yet we know that for Leopardi, reason and knowledge ultimately lead to the recognition that existence is meaningless, mainly because there is no God to give it any meaning. Because of this lack of existential guidance, and because of the moral relativism analysed above, freedom cannot achieve any absolute good. Human beings can well be free in their actions, but they certainly have no power to change the human condition, so that their freedom is useless for the purpose of being happy.[213] This conclusion – perhaps unexpected in Leopardi – is central to existentialism.

That human beings suffer under the burden of their freedom is one of the core ideas of *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880). The Dostoevsky scholar Alexandr Krinitsyn argues that Dostoevsky likely read the *Storia del genere umano* before writing *The Brothers*

[213] This holds completely true for Sartre as well.

Karamazov (Krinitsyn 2013).[214] Whether or not this is the case, Krinitsyn underlines the striking parallels between the two texts:

> The similarity of motifs and the logic of thought in *Storia del genere umano* with Dostoevsky's plots are so unexpected that Leopardi's essay could well pass for the third poem of Ivan Karamazov. Like Leopardi, Ivan Karamazov considers people weak and limited, destined for unhappiness and unable to change their fate. The *Grand Inquisitor* becomes the expression of his ideas (Krinitsyn 2013).[215]

In both texts, the main reason for human unhappiness is freedom and the truth, even though in Dostoevsky, like in Kierkegaard, human beings are only free to accept or refuse God. This, however, does not diminish their suffering. Christ demands faith and detachment from worldly goods – not in the name of miracles, but in virtue of genuine love. In the text, the Inquisitor asks Christ: who could possibly meet this demand? 'Didst thou forget that man prefers peace, and even death, to freedom of choice […] ? Nothing is more seductive for man than his freedom of conscience, but nothing is a greater cause of suffering' (Dostoevsky 2012, 402-03). The Grand Inquisitor insists that freedom and truth simply do not suit the weak, finite nature of human beings. They could, at most, suit an infinite being, as is Christ. In giving freedom and truth to humans, therefore, Christ has only committed a great cruelty. Something similar happens in Leopardi's *Storia del genere umano*, where the truth suits, and indeed lives with, the gods, but is deadly for human beings: 'perocché laddove agl'immortali ella [*sc*. la Verità] dimostrava la loro beatitudine, discoprirebbe agli uomini interamente e proporrebbe ai medesimi del continuo dinanzi agli occhi la loro infelicità' (91). Truth is in this context understood by Leopardi in the Greek way as 'unveiling' (ἀλήθεια). Thus, when it lives with the gods, it

[214] I was recently able to confirm the high likelihood that Dostoevsky was indeed familiar with Leopardi's texts through philological evidence (see Costa 2024). Severino also compellingly compares the *Dialogo di Timandro ed Eleandro* with the *Legend of the Grand Inquisitor* arguing that 'Ivan è in qualche modo un alleato del Giocatore Nero [*sc*. Leopardi]' (2015, § 6).

[215] I provide the original Russian and Danish (in the case of Kierkegaard) only when the wording of the original text is directly relevant to the interpretation of the argument. In all other instances, the quotations appear in translation only.

unveils their real condition; when it lives with human beings, it unveils theirs. Both the gods and human beings desire the infinite, but the gods are immortal, and thus they experience the infinite – they literally live in the infinite. Humans are finite, and experience death. They try to be content with the indefinite, i.e., 'le apparenze di quell'infinito' (84), but unsuccessfully. When brought to human beings, the truth unveils their tragic condition of beings who are torn between the desire for the infinite and their structural impossibility of attaining it.

Leopardi's engagement with freedom does not end here. A few weeks after developing his theory of freedom, he writes: 'l'uomo è naturalmente, primitivamente, ed essenzialmente libero, indipendente, uguale agli altri, e queste qualità appartengono inseparabilmente all'idea della natura e dell'essenza costitutiva dell'uomo' (*Zib*. 579-80. 29-31 gennaio 1821). And he concludes: 'un uomo privo della libertà sarebbe privo dell'essenza umana' (ibid.). These are no minor claims: Leopardi is saying that freedom is an essential feature of what it means to be human. And even the notion of self-determination, in these very terms, is present: 'certamente bisogna che l'uomo […] si possa determinare, perch'egli è libero' (*Zib*. 380. 7 dicembre 1820). These notions are greatly under-discussed within Leopardi studies. What follows is even more radical: freedom is so essential to the human being that not even a voluntary surrender of it is possible:

> nè egli si può condannare a perdere realmente e radicalmente questa qualità [*sc*. la libertà], neppure spontaneamente: e nessuna promessa, contratto, volontà propria o libera, lo può mai spogliare in minima parte del diritto di seguire in tutto e per tutto la sua volontà, oggi in un modo domani in un altro: e come egli ha potuto adesso volontariamente ubbidire, e promettere di ubbidire per sempre, così l'istante appresso egli può disubbidire in diritto, e non può non poterlo fare (*Zib*. 581. 29-31 gennaio 1821).

There is no way humans can get rid of their freedom.[216] Drawing an exact comparison with Sartre does require caution, yet Leopardi's assertion that 'nè egli si può condannare a perdere […] questa qualità, neppure spontaneamente' means, quite exactly, that he is 'condemned to be free' (Sartre 2020, 577).[217]

After analysing these passages, the prejudice that freedom is irrelevant in Leopardi's works is no longer tenable.[218] It is more accurate to say that it has not yet received the critical attention it deserves. One might say that freedom is not as pervasive in Leopardi's works as it is in existentialism, and one would be correct. Yet the lesser insistence on the topic does not make the topic irrelevant, let alone falsifying the thesis. Leopardi rejects determinism, and holds that freedom is an essential feature of what it means to be human, to the point that human beings are condemned to be free.[219]

Through the lens of existentialism, Leopardi's theory of freedom acquires a much deeper meaning. Once again, we can see in Leopardi a precise convergence of logic, metaphysics, and ethics. Empirical freedom – the freedom to choose – rests on a more fundamental ontological freedom: freedom from the principle of sufficient reason. On this foundation, Leopardi begins to outline a theory of what might be called logical freedom, in which the human being is not even bound by the principle of non-contradiction, as we have seen above. This opens the door to a new kind of truth: a 'subjective truth', free from both logical and metaphysical constraints. Leopardi gestures

[216] When in the *Zibaldone* freedom is declared an illusion (*Zib*. 21, 888, 911 and passim), it is understood as political freedom, rather than the ontological freedom of the single individual.
[217] 'je suis condamné à être libre' (Sartre 1943, 484). If 'I cannot condemn myself to lose freedom', then 'I am condemned to have freedom'.
[218] The objection of irrelevance is treated more broadly at 7.2.
[219] Leopardi had already defended free will in his *Dissertazione sopra le doti dell'anima umana*, and there is no indication that he later changed his mind about it (see Leopardi 1995). He changed his mind on the immortality of the soul and the impossibility for matter to think, endorsed in the *Dissertation* but later rejected.

toward this idea in these same reflections, but for clarity of analysis, the notion of subjective truth is addressed in Chapter 3.

6.2 The difference with Kierkegaard

Kierkegaard's categories of choice, possibility, and freedom are all grounded in a Christian framework: they are not absolute in themselves but are relative and subordinate to God as the ultimate reference point. In *Either/Or* (1843), Kierkegaard writes:

> [the human being] repents himself back into himself, back into the family, […] until he finds himself in God. Only on this condition can he choose himself. And this is the only condition he wants, for only in this way can he choose himself absolutely (1987, vol. II, 182).

Thus, 'choosing oneself is identical with repenting oneself' (Kierkegaard 1987, vol. II, 202), and 'repenting oneself' means seeking God and His forgiveness. For Kierkegaard, the self is ultimately reabsorbed in God, or else dissolves into nothingness. Leopardi holds the exact opposite, to the point that even religion, if accepted at all, is subordinate to the infinite possibility of nothingness: 'la Religion Cristiana […] resta tutta quanta in piedi […] non come assolutamente vera, e necessaria indipendentemente dalle cose quali sono, […] ma relativamente' (*Zib.* 1645. 5-7 settembre 1821). Rather, 'l'infinita possibilità è l'unica cosa assoluta' (*Zib*. 1623. 3 settembre 1821.). Kierkegaard subordinates the category of possibility to the absolute truth of Christianity: God is the truth, and we can *either* accept *or* reject Him; Leopardi subordinates Christianity to the absolute category of possibility: Christianity is not the absolute truth, but only *one* possible truth, relative and subordinate to the absolute possibility. The complete subordination of Kierkegaard's 'system' to God becomes even more apparent in passages like the following: 'the person who lives aesthetically sees only possibilities everywhere; for him these make up the content of future time, whereas the person who lives ethically sees tasks everywhere' (Kierkegaard 1987, vol. II, 211). In Kierkegaard's worldview human beings know what they are, because God created them according to an idea (see Sartre 1943, 513), and they also know the values between which they are allowed to choose, because God set them.

The human being's choice is then whether or not to adhere to God's law. Abraham is not free to choose how to treat his son Isaac; he is told what to do: he can choose whether or not to obey God's command (Kierkegaard [1843] 1983, 60 and passim). This view is entirely foreign to Leopardi's existentialism. It can at most be traced back to Christian existentialism, for everything is inscribed in a divine frame. Sartre, too, would reject Kierkegaard's position. For Sartre, 'seeing possibilities everywhere' is not a sign of the aesthetic life but the human condition itself – condemned to freedom. The atheist existentialist never sees tasks imposed from outside: her or his tasks are self-determined. Pretending that our tasks result from outside ourselves is, for Sartre, the very definition of bad faith. In atheistic existentialism, what the human being has to be is always *in front of* them – they have to create what they are to be. This, according to Sartre, is what it means to be free:

> The for-itself has to be what it is, […] existence precedes and conditions its essence […]. I am condemned to exist forever beyond my essence, beyond the motives and reasons for my action: I am condemned to be free (Sartre 2020, 577).[220]

In *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre quotes Kierkegaard only in regard to anguish and in his essay specifically devoted to Kierkegaard (*L'universel singulier*, 1964 in Sartre 1971, vol. IX), Sartre praises him for his reflections on freedom, for his notion of the single individual, and for other relevant topics; but existentialism is not mentioned.

This contrast is supported by an illuminating essay by Timothy Jackson, who has written extensively on Kierkegaard's theology. Jackson describes Kierkegaard as an 'Arminian' – that is, one who believes that faith is not a human achievement but a divine gift, a doctrine in line with Protestantism. As Jackson puts it: '"Arminianism" […] holds that, on our own, *we can make no move whatsoever toward God*. God must turn us and

[220] Le pour-soi a à être ce qu'il est, […] en lui l'existence précède et conditionne l'essence […]. Je suis condamné à exister pour toujours par delà mon essence, par delà les mobiles et les motifs de mon acte : je suis condamné à être libre (Sartre 1943, 483-84).

draw us. […] We can say "Yes" or "No"' (Jackson 1998, 237; italics in the original). 'The human role with respect to God', Jackson goes on, 'is thus voluntary but exclusively receptive' (ibid.). As Kierkegaard himself writes, 'man's highest achievement is to let God be able to help him' (Kierkegaard 1967, vol. III, 22). Jackson's conclusion is crucial for this project:

> it is quite clear that self-righteousness and self-sufficiency are ruled out. Grace as unmerited favor is indispensable for justification before God, and only an undialectical reading can make Kierkegaard seem an advocate of the solitary 'autonomy' defended by Kant and radicalized by Sartre (Jackson 1998, 237).[221]

These considerations demonstrate once again that Kierkegaard can only be taken to represent one side of existentialism: the Christian one. The more radical face of existentialism – the one Sartre calls 'atheistic' – has its roots in Leopardi. Kierkegaard does have a key role in the preparation of many central concepts of existentialism in general, like anguish, freedom, choice, and the single individual, as is widely recognised in the scholarship. When it comes to the theoretical foundation of this philosophy, however, such foundation is not to be found in Kierkegaard: freedom is not as broad as in Sartre, if we have to obey God; choice is always between pre-set alternatives; and anguish and despair can be ultimately overcome through faith (Fabro in Kierkegaard 2013, 97). Sartre's conceptions of anguish, choice and freedom, on the contrary, are grounded in the fact that there is no God to provide guidance.

6.3 The difference with Nietzsche

> Once a human being arrives at the basic conviction that he *must* be commanded, he becomes 'a believer'; conversely, one could conceive of a delight and power of self-determination, a *freedom* of the will, in which the spirit takes leave of all faith and every wish for certainty, practised as it is in maintaining itself on light ropes and possibilities

[221] This view is shared by Solomon, who writes that: 'the standard […] existentialist cliche "existence precedes essence" does not apply literally to Kierkegaard' (2001, 85).

> and dancing even beside abysses. Such a spirit would be the *free spirit par excellence* (Nietzsche 2001, § 347; italics in the original).[222]

Nietzsche's claim is clear: belief in God rules out true freedom. This divergence in the understanding of freedom is another marker of the substantial difference between Christian (Kierkegaardian) and atheistic (Leopardian) existentialism. Sartre (2020, passim), Jaspers, and Camus all align with Nietzsche's idea. Jaspers, for example, writes: 'I myself cannot but hold with Kant that if revelation were a reality it would be calamitous for man's created freedom' (1967, 10).[223] In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus similarly conceives of God's omnipotence and human freedom as mutually exclusive (1975, 55).

For Nietzsche, the creation of new values is only possible against the backdrop of atheism. In accordance with this idea, he redefines the notion of virtue in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1885): 'my brother, if you have one virtue, and it is your virtue, then you have it in common with no one' (Nietzsche 2006, 24).[224] He insists on the necessity of inventing our own values, independently of those of Christianity or anything else that could be seen as an authority. It is thus more correct, for the purpose of this project, to call them 'values' rather than 'virtues', for there are no virtues and vices outside a pre-given ethical reference. Even the notion of *choice* becomes suspect, as it logically implies transcendental alternatives – i.e., options that precede the choice and make it possible. In Nietzsche's and Sartre's existentialism, however, there are no such alternatives: there is

[222] Wo ein Mensch zu der Grundüberzeugung kommt, dass ihm befohlen werden *muss*, wird er „gläubig"; umgekehrt wäre eine Lust und Kraft der Selbstbestimmung, eine *Freiheit* des Willens denkbar, bei der ein Geist jedem Glauben, jedem Wunsch nach Gewissheit den Abschied giebt, geübt, wie er ist, auf leichten Seilen und Möglichkeiten sich halten zu können und selbst an Abgründen noch zu tanzen. Ein solcher Geist wäre der *freie Geist par excellence* (Nietzsche 2021, vol. III, § 347). We are in *The Gay Science*.

[223] 'Ich selber kann nicht anders als mit Kant denken: Wäre Offenbarung Realität, so wäre sie das Unheil für die geschaffene Freiheit des Menschen' (Jaspers 2016, 121). Jaspers' belonging to Christian existentialism – as Sartre claims (2007, 20) – has indeed been questioned. This problem, however, falls beyond the purposes of this study.

[224] 'Mein Bruder, wenn du eine Tugend hast, und es deine Tugend ist, so hast du sie mit Niemandem gemeinsam' (Nietzsche 2021, vol. IV, 42).

therefore not choice but *creation*. In this sense, Kierkegaard chooses; Nietzsche and Sartre create.[225]

At this point, we encounter a well-known problem in Nietzsche scholarship: Nietzsche's rejection of the notion of free will. Robert Solomon, a prominent scholar of existentialism and of Nietzsche specifically, has written what is probably the most significant study on this issue. He suggests that Nietzsche's understanding of 'self-making' 'does not involve "free will"' (2002, 64). Solomon also neatly distinguishes Sartre's version of self-creation from Nietzsche's. For Sartre, self-creation entails that 'we create ourselves *de nihilo*, by sheer will or decision. We act as an original cause for which there are no prior determining causes' (Solomon 2002, 75). In *Twilight of the Idols* (1888), Nietzsche rejects this view and treats free will as a 'great error' (see Nietzsche 2008, VI, § 7). Yet Solomon argues that Nietzsche nonetheless upholds an existentialist form of self-creation and responsibility. He offers the following example:

> A person does not take a drink *in order to* become an alcoholic, but becoming an alcoholic may be the end result and, at some point, one might well say (rather unsympathetically) that he has 'made himself what he is'. Indeed, his drinking itself may soon become incontinent, against not only his better judgment but even, in an obvious sense, against his will. Nevertheless, he has created himself, made himself into what he is (Solomon 2002, 79).

In this way, Solomon intends to salvage existentialist freedom and self-creation in Nietzsche. Yet this line of reasoning arguably misses the core issue: is there a space, a gap, a nothingness, between an alleged cause and my action? This is Sartre's definition of freedom: freedom is that '*nothing* that insinuates itself between my motives and my act' (Sartre 2020, 72; italics in the original).[226] Solomon underlines instead that in Nietzsche's philosophy 'a strong person cannot but be strong, and a weak person cannot but be weak, and the particular actions they perform are thus "compelled" by their

[225] The problem of how such creation is possible is dealt with in Chapter 3.
[226] '*rien* qui s'insinue entre les motifs et l'acte' (Sartre 1943, 69; italics in the original).

natures' (Solomon 2002, 79), yet he concludes that 'nevertheless, they are responsible for these actions' (ibid.). This conclusion is highly debatable and is certainly not the traditional existentialist notion of freedom: being compelled to perform an action seems to rule out choice by definition. Phrases like 'cannot but be' and 'being compelled to' are always dismissed by Sartre as excuses and bad faith.[227] Solomon's conclusion is that 'to be free and responsible, it is not necessary to deliberate or even to make a decision. It is enough to act in accordance with one's highest aspiration'.[228] For Sartre and Leopardi, however, because there is no way to get rid of freedom, such a claim would be just a play on words devoid of authenticity.

The precedence of existence over essence, if taken seriously, entails radical freedom. Leopardi's notion of freedom is much closer to Sartre's than Kierkegaard's or Nietzsche's notions of freedom are. By abandoning the Christian framework of pre-given values, Leopardi radicalises freedom in a way that Kierkegaard does not. Moreover, unlike Nietzsche, Leopardi never calls the existence of free will into question.

[227] To those who might want to invoke compatibilist theories of free will (e.g., Fischer 2012; Sartorio 2016), it must be clarified that in this project freedom and free will are understood in their radical, Sartrean (and in fact Kantian) sense as described above.
[228] Solomon holds that, in Nietzsche's view, we have free will in Harry Frankfurt's sense, i.e., that we act in accordance with our second-order desires (Frankfurt 1971).

7. Replies to possible objections

7.1 First objection: Leopardi does use the phrase 'human nature'

It might be objected that Leopardi does at times use the phrase 'natura umana' with the apparent implication of its stability. This occurs, for example, in *Al Conte Carlo Pepoli*: 'la bella / Felicità, cui solo agogna e cerca / La natura mortal' (ll. 24-25). Even more explicitly, in the *Zibaldone*, Leopardi writes: 'tutti [*sc*. gli esseri umani] hanno i medesimi principii elementari costituenti la natura umana' (note to *Zib*. 2637. 13 ottobre 1822). These 'elementary principles', however, are not specified. Instead, he argues immediately afterwards that conformability in fact overrides any implication of stability, because 'questi principii' are 'pochissimi', 'infinitamente e diversissimamente *e anche contrariamente* modificabili' (*Zib*. 2637; italics in the original). What may appear as features of human nature are in fact features of the human condition: they describe, that is, not how human beings immutably are, but what their immutable existential state is. The only stable elements human beings share are the following: self-love (*Zib*. 872, 2497); the desire for the infinite (*Zib*. 175); illusions (*Lettera al Giordani* 30th June 1820 and *Zib*. 51); freedom (*Zib*. 580); and unhappiness (*Zib*. 4510).[229] It is important to note that all these features are in fact lacks: the desire for the infinite is a lack of the infinite; illusions are a lack of truth; freedom is a lack of necessity; unhappiness a lack of happiness. Leopardi defines the human being more by what it is not rather than by what it is: it is not eternal; it does not know the truth (and when it does it is a harmful one); it is not determined in its actions; it is not happy. The human being is a wonderful collection

[229] Whenever the phrase 'human essence' occurs in the *Zibaldone* is better understood as 'human condition'. This applies to passages like the following: 'dal che segue che l'uomo, come dicono, perfezionato, è, per essenza umana, e per ordine generale della natura, più infelice del naturale' (*Zib*. 2413. 2 maggio 1822).

of lacks. The only non-negative element is self-love, which however still fails to define human nature because animals (*Zib*. 1458-59) and all living beings exhibit it as well (*Zib*. 2155, 4477).

Thus, if the phrase 'human nature' is used to denote this set of lacks, it may well be used, but these lacks identify more the human condition rather than fixed qualities all human beings display. The point Leopardi is interested in making is that conformability and possibility always have the upper hand when it comes to defining human beings, as they ultimately override any supposedly fixed and immutable identity.

7.2 Second objection: freedom is irrelevant in Leopardi

I would now like to respond to the following objection: 'in Leopardi's texts freedom is not that relevant after all: everything is determined by fate, or nature'. This view may appear to be supported by passages such as: 'la mia filosofia fa rea d'ogni cosa la natura, e discolpando gli uomini totalmente, rivolge l'odio, o se non altro il lamento, a principio più alto, all'origine vera de' mali de' viventi' (*Zib*. 4428. 2 gennaio 1829); in *La sera del dì di festa*, nature is described as 'onnipossente' (l. 13), producing an unchangeable human condition; even more explicit passages can be found: 'nei caratteri degli uomini, novantanove parti son opera delle circostanze' (*Zib*. 2863. 30 giugno 1823).

The contrast Leopardi seeks with these passages, however, is not with freedom, but with nature: ninety-nine parts out of one-hundred depend on circumstances *rather being determined a priori by nature*. The essence of human beings is to be shaped within their existence, rather than being already determined by an a priori essence. Leopardi clarifies this a few pages afterwards: 'come l'uomo sia quasi tutto opera delle circostanze e degli accidenti: quanto poco abbia fatto in lui la natura' (*Zib*. 3301. 29-30 agosto 1823).

Leopardi emphasises the absence of a fixed human nature or essence, decided a priori by nature.[230] At no point in Leopardi's work is chance granted such power as to preclude human choice. On the contrary, both ontological and empirical freedom are always explicitly defended.

To the importance of freedom in Leopardi, many interpreters would object that, in Leopardi's worldview, we can do nothing to alter our condition, to be happy, or to achieve the infinite. They are correct, yet from that it does not follow that humans are not free. This objection stems from a misunderstanding: if one claims that human beings are not responsible for the fact that existence is unhappy, this is true in Leopardi, but so is in the existentialists. If, on the other hand, one claims that Leopardi excludes human freedom, one would be mistaken, as I have largely made clear. We should not confuse the human condition with human freedom. To say that the human condition is tragic is one thing; whether humans are free in their actions and able to act on top of conformability and habituation, is quite another. Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Sartre, Camus, Heidegger, all conceive of the human condition as tragic, and so does Leopardi – this is typical of existentialism in general. They all also maintain that humans are free, and so does Leopardi. Yet human freedom is not limitless, and certainly not powerful enough to change the human condition. This, again, applies to all the existentialists, including Sartre, by all means the most strenuous defender of freedom in existentialism. The objection also stems from the fact that Leopardi does not insist on empirical freedom, as many existentialists do – a legitimate concern at first glance. Leopardi stops at what we have called ontological freedom, without emphasising its empirical counterpart: that is, Leopardi seems content with emphasising that the human being is essentially and

[230] The nature/circumstances dichotomy is also used in other passages. See, for instance, *Zib*. 3344.

necessarily free to act in indefinitely many ways, but does not delve into what these ways are, how they can be embraced etc. Here is where his existentialism stops, one could say. 20th-century existentialists, on the contrary, expand greatly on the various choices human beings can make. This is a major 'relevant difference' between Leopardi and 20th-century existentialists.

7.3 Third objection: Leopardi does not reserve the term 'existence' for human beings, as the existentialists do: therefore, he is not an existentialist.

David Jérôme writes that, in Leopardi, 'l'existence n'est pas une affaire spécifiquement humaine' and concludes that, lacking this important feature, Leopardi cannot be considered an existentialist (2021, 253). Jérôme is correct in noting that the term 'existence' in Leopardi applies to every existing thing, whereas the existentialists, in the wake of Kierkegaard, restrict it to human beings (see Cooper 2012, 34 and Fergnani 2018, 17). Yet Leopardi clearly displays the intention of isolating the case of human beings: this occurs in the *Canto notturno*, where the human being is distinctly separated from the animal, and in numerous passages of the *Zibaldone*. Human beings possess three features that make them unique: 'life', their 'infinite conformability', and their 'second nature'.

1. The category of 'life'

If for other existentialists only the human being really 'exists', for Leopardi only the human being really 'lives'. By reserving the category of 'life' to human beings, Leopardi achieves an identical kind of isolation. 'Nell'[uomo]', he writes, 'è maggior la vita che negli altri viventi; e la vita si può […] definire una maggiore o minore conformabilità, un numero e valore di disposizioni naturali prevalente […] a quello delle ingenite qualità'

(*Zib*. 3381. 6-7 settembre 1823). Life is defined as conformability, so that a living creature is as alive as it is self-conforming. 'E se v'ha cosa', he goes on, 'che non sia punto conformabile naturalmente, quella niente partecipa della vita, ma solo esiste' (*Zib*. 3382. 8 settembre 1823). One could almost say that Leopardi restricts the term 'existence' to objects. Thus, objects merely exist; human beings live.[231] The only real difference between Leopardi and 20th-century existentialists is that for Leopardi the difference between human beings, animals, and objects is continuous, whereas for Sartre and Heidegger it is discrete. This means, for example, that for Leopardi animals do have a degree of freedom – albeit not as vast as humans – and therefore a degree of life. These reflections, however, are not sufficiently developed in Leopardi's texts to allow for a complete and consistent theory of freedom, nor for a satisfying explanation of the ontological difference between humans and animals.[232]

2. Infinite conformability

The second distinguishing trait of human beings is their infinite conformability, which ultimately coincides with their 'life'. Only the human being is 'sommamente e infinitamente o indeterminatamente conformabile', whereas animals are indeed self-conforming, but to a much lesser degree (*Zib*. 3467. 19 settembre 1823). Dispositions to be able to be are the peak of conformability, and they pertain to human beings only: 'a differenza di tutti gli altri animali, aveva detto Leopardi, l'uomo non è soltanto "disposizione ad essere", ma è "disposizione a poter essere"' (Luporini 1996, 122).

3. Human beings and their 'second nature'

[231] See also Moneta 2006, 153 ff.
[232] We must not forget that all these ideas are little more than sketches of a private diary, after all, and were not intended for publication in their current form.

Among their infinite possibilities, human beings have chosen to pursue their insatiable desire for knowledge, cultivating reason. Over the course of human history, reason has grown so powerful that, through its repeated use, has produced a second nature in human beings (*Dialogo di Plotino e di Porfirio*, 560).[233] This second nature also pertains to human beings alone, so much so that the new human nature is almost reason itself: 'la natura umana è appresso a poco la ragione' (*Zib*. 2404. 29 aprile 1822). Jérôme seems to underestimate the potential of the theory of dispositions and Leopardi's insistence on this uniquely human second nature. Jérôme's reluctance to adopt the existentialist label seems less a philosophical verdict than a hesitation toward its novelty.

7.4 Fourth objection: Leopardi's insights are not original; he repeats the theses of the *philosophes*.

Some might think that the theses presented as 'existentialist' in this study are not truly such, because Leopardi derives them from earlier philosophers, particularly the so-called *philosophes*. For Leopardi, the most relevant seem to be Condillac, Diderot, Voltaire, Condorcet, Rousseau, Montesquieu, D'Holbach, and D'Alambert. To varying degrees, they all contributed to Leopardi's thought, and their influence on Leopardi has been more or less thoroughly studied.[234] Rolando Damiani has highlighted that Leopardi's notions of conformability and habituation, for instance, might have been influenced by D'Holbach's theory of 'mobilité' developed in his *Système de la nature*, by La Mettrie's

[233] See also: 'l'assuefazione è una seconda natura, massime l'assuefazione così radicata, così lunga, e cominciata in sì tenera età, com'è quell'assuefazione (composta d'assuefazioni infinite e diversissime) che ci fa esser tutt'altri che uomini naturali, o conformi alla prima natura dell'uomo, e alla natura generale degli esseri terrestri. Basti dire che volendo con ogni massimo sforzo rimetterci nello stato naturale, non potremmo, nè quanto al fisico, […] nè posto che si potesse quanto al fisico ed esternamente, si potrebbe quanto al morale ed internamente. […] La natura nostra presente è appresso a poco la ragione' (*Zib*. 2402-04. 29 aprile 1822). See also *Zib*. 3364 and passim.

[234] See for example Timpanaro 1969, Polizzi 2003, and Bodei 2022.

notion of 'homme machine', as well as by Helvétius and Condillac (see Damiani in Leopardi 1997b, 3399). To this list we might add Buffon's *Histoire naturelle* and Rousseau's *Discours sur l'origine et les fondaments de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*. One could even go further back to Montaigne's *Essais*, which include an entire chapter on habituation: 'De la coutume' (in Montaigne 2003, I, 23).[235]

The same could be said about atheism. All these references, however, may in fact strengthen rather than weaken the case for Leopardi's existentialism, as it seems perfectly plausible that both Leopardi and Sartre developed their conceptions of the human being also by drawing on these authors. Yet this backward search for influences still seems to be missing the point: it risks making the obvious and uninformative point that any idea has, in some form, already been expressed – something along the lines of Whitehead's famous remark that Western philosophy is just a series of footnotes to Plato. As critics, we are sometimes guilty of a sterile 'anxiety of influence', yet in a rather different sense than Bloom's: we feel compelled to connect an idea, no matter how original, to some earlier thinker. I do not intend to claim that Leopardi's notion of habituation and conformability were entirely unprecedented, nor that Leopardi is the first atheist in history. It would be impossible here to address every point Leopardi makes to show whether and how it is an advancement on which preceding philosopher – but, again, this would miss the point. I will instead limit myself to some general remarks which I believe successfully respond to the objection.

First of all, even if not all of Leopardi's ideas are entirely his own (whose are?), he expresses them in a voice which is unmistakably unique – especially within the deeply personal and, in many respects, intimate, framework of the *Zibaldone*. The different

[235] The most cited philosophers in this regard are usually Rousseau and D'Holbach. For Leopardi's advancements on Rousseau, see Audegean 2017, 197 ff.; for his advancements on D'Holbach see Capitano 2020.

context in which the same ideas re-germinate, is often enough to make them different ideas.

The main difference, however, that sets Leopardi apart from the *philosophes* is the formulation of the precedence of existence over essence and its atheistic understanding – a combination, to my knowledge and according to the scholars of existentialism cited in this study, never expressed with such clarity before Leopardi and so richly developed. So much so that it is often attributed to Kierkegaard. In what ways such attribution is inaccurate, I have shown already. So much so that Sartre himself believed to be the first to express it. A passage from Sartre underscores Leopardi's originality in its full extent:

> Eighteenth-century atheistic philosophers suppressed the idea of God, but not, for all that, the idea that essence precedes existence. We encounter this idea nearly everywhere: in the works of Diderot, Voltaire, and even Kant. Here again [*sc*. in Kant] the essence of man precedes his historically primitive existence in nature (2007, 21-22).[236]

As I was saying above, Leopardi might not be the first atheist in history, but he really seems to be the first one to endorse the precedence of existence over essence. Sartre goes on to argue that only with atheistic existentialism – which he represents – is the precedence of the essence finally overcome. Well, as Chapter 1 of this study shows, the reversal of essence and existence is already present in Leopardi, and in fact underpins his entire philosophy.[237]

[236] Au XVIIIe siècle dans l'athéisme des philosophes, la notion de Dieu est supprimée, mais non pas pour autant l'idée que l'essence précède l'existence. Cette idée, nous la retrouvons un peu partout : nous la retrouvons chez Diderot, chez Voltaire, et même chez Kant. […] Ainsi, là encore [*sc*. chez Kant], l'essence d'homme précède cette existence historique que nous rencontrons dans la nature (Sartre 1966, 20).

[237] Another key difference is what might be called Leopardi's distinctively 'existential posture' (Aloisi, in a private conversation; see also Barricelli 1986, 33) – a sensibility which is largely foreign to the *philosophes*, and which arguably only Pascal shares. By this phrase, Aloisi and I mean the insistence on asking fundamental questions about the meaning of existence, why we were born, what are we to do with ourselves etc. I believe that the section titled *The existential protest* serves as sufficient proof of this claim.

8. Application to theology: the problem of God

The existentialist principle entails the non-existence of a First Being creating things. On a more intimate level, too, faith in a personal God is not Leopardi's answer to the pain of existence.

Belief in the absolute contingency of everything rules out a necessary being by definition: 'le cose non sono quali sono, se non perch'elle son tali. Ragione preesistente, o dell'esistenza o del suo modo, […] questa ragione non v'è […]. Come dunque immaginiamo noi un Essere necessario?' (*Zib*. 1613. 2 settembre 1821). Sartre's remark sounds like a reply to Leopardi: 'no necessary being can explain existence' (2000, 188).[238] Thus, in Leopardi's own words, 'il principio delle cose, e di Dio stesso, è il nulla' (*Zib*. 1341. 17 luglio 1821).[239]

Leopardi appears to exclude God from his 'system' altogether. Yet, with the idea that 'il principio delle cose, e di Dio stesso, è il nulla', he attempts to salvage God as contingent. Nothingness is the principle of everything, but God remains possible *after* nothingness. This move has two crucial implications: a. that God is not the original creator of everything, as we have seen; and b. that 'God – if he exists – is contingent' (Sartre 2020, 132).[240] In his reflections on the existence of God, Sartre uses 'contingent'; Leopardi prefers 'possible'. What is the difference?

Abbagnano explains that Greek and Latin philosophy did not distinguish between 'contingent' and 'possible' (1971, s.v. 'contingente'). In modern philosophy, 'contingent' means 'not necessitated', i.e., not determined by anything else to be, and to be such and

[238] 'aucun être nécessaire ne peut expliquer l'existence' (Sartre 1965, 147).
[239] The phrase 'necessary being' was used in the works of Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz, and reserved to God alone. On these authors both Leopardi and Sartre draw.
[240] 'Dieu, s'il existe, est contingent' (Sartre 1943, 117).

such. This becomes the standard meaning with Spinoza's *Ethics* (2018, I, 33, scol. 1), where nothing is contingent, and everything is determined by God/Nature to be, and to be the way it is.[241] Sartre uses the term in the same sense as 'the opposite of necessity' (Michelman 2010, s.v. 'contingency'), also meaning, therefore, free and unforeseeable (Abbagnano 1971 s.v. 'contingente').

Leopardi does employ 'contingente' in his early *Disssertazione sopra l'ente in generale* as the opposite of 'necessario' (Leopardi 1995, 65). In his mature thought, however, the term disappears, and is replaced by 'possibile', though still clearly used as the opposite of 'necessario' (*Zib*. 1613 ff.).[242] Abbagnano notes that in the Scholastic philosophy, because of the influence of Arabic thinkers, 'contingent' came to mean something that may or may not exist in itself but can still necessarily follow from something else. 'Possible', by contrast, is neither necessary in itself nor made necessary by anything else. Leopardi may prefer 'possible' in order to respect this distinction. In any case, for the purposes of this discussion, 'possible' and 'contingent' can be treated as synonymous – as does Descartes in his *Metaphysical Meditations* ([1641] 1984, vol. I, 166), who was a major influence on Leopardi, especially in terms of philosophical language. Leopardi and Sartre hold that nothing is determined, placing themselves in direct opposition to Spinoza's necessitarianism.[243] Therefore, God, if He exists at all, comes after the original nothingness.

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[241] For a comprehensive account of Leopardi's relationship with Spinoza see Negri 2006 and Biscuso 2019, 15-41.

[242] 'Necessario' is defined in the classic philosophical tradition as 'ciò che non può non essere' (Abbagnano 1971, s.v. 'necessario'), either because of something else, or because it contains the reason for being in itself. Leopardi, however, understands this term in the former sense only. The latter, also called 'aseity' in the philosophical tradition, is said by Leopardi to pertain to every entity, or to none, which is the same (*Zib*. 1615). The point is that there is no necessary and absolute reason causing things to exist and to exist in the way they do.

[243] Of course, Leopardi's is not opposed to Spinoza in all respects: the *Frammento apocrifo di Stratone da Lampsaco*, for instance, is a wonderful example of Spinoza's afterlife in the 19th century, as Leopardi's 'eternal matter' is susceptible of infinite 'modes' exactly like Spinoza's 'infinite substance'.

Quite soon thereafter, however, Leopardi's conception of God shifts again. To illustrate this development, Cesare Galimberti draws on a passage by René Guénon:

> *l'Essere non è infinito*, dal momento che non coincide con *la Possibilità* totale […]. Al di fuori dell'Essere vi è dunque tutto il resto, e cioè tutte le possibilità di non-manifestazione […]; e quanto è fuori e al di là della manifestazione, in mancanza di altro termine, non ci rimane che usare quello di *Non-Essere* […]. *Si può dire che il Non-Essere*, nel senso ora indicato, *è più dell'Essere* (Guénon 1965, 35-36 in Galimberti 1997, 207).

What exists is infinitely outnumbered by what does not. Yet infinity, Leopardi claims, does not exist, because everything that exists is limited and finite (*Zib*. 4177-78. 1° maggio 1826). If nothing is infinite, then only nothingness can be infinite, so that 'l'infinito venga in sostanza a esser lo stesso che il nulla' (*Zib*. 4178. 2 maggio 1826). Possibility, therefore, is infinite because infinite is the number of things that could be but are not. Now, infinite possibility implies the existence of a power capable of actualising those possibilities. This is how Leopardi finds a way to reintroduce God into his system – not as contingent but as coinciding with the necessary infinite possibility. The argument goes as follows:

> l'infinita possibilità […] non può esistere senza un potere il quale possa fare che le cose sieno, e sieno in qualsivoglia modo possibile. Se esiste l'infinita possibilità esiste l'infinita onnipotenza, perché se questa non esiste, quella non è vera. […] Ecco Dio: e la sua necessità dedotta dall'esistenza, e la sua essenza riposta nell'infinita possibilità (*Zib*. 1646. 5-7 settembre 1821).

God coincides with the infinite possibility of nothingness.[244] Thus, God returns to being absolute: 'l'infinita possibilità è l'unica cosa assoluta. Ell'è necessaria, e preesiste alle cose. Quest'esistenza non l'ha che in Dio' (*Zib*. 1623. 3 settembre 1821). 'Io considero dunque Iddio […] come racchiudente in se stesso tutte le possibilità, ed esistente in tutti i modi possibili' (*Zib*. 1620. 3 settembre 1821).[245] Leopardi's effort during this period to

[244] For this coincidence of nothingness, infinite possibility, and God see Natoli and Prete 1998 and especially Lettieri 2024, 61-71.

[245] This idea is perhaps inherited from Leibniz's *Monadology*: 'We may also hold that this supreme substance, which is unique, universal and necessary, nothing outside of it being independent of it, this substance, which is a pure sequence of possible being, must be illimitable and must contain as much reality as is possible' (Leibniz 1998, § 40).

reconcile his existentialism with a form of divinity is as patent as it is problematic. Many critics have argued that, with his attempt to rescue Christianity, Leopardi was only trying to avoid open conflict with his family and the religious milieu of his time (see, among others, Tilgher 1940 and Severino 1990). In any case, after these attempts in Summer 1821, Leopardi distances himself from Christianity for good.

This God coinciding with nothingness and infinite possibility is undeniably difficult to conceive. Scholars have compared it to Plotinus' One (Givone 1995, 146, and Faggin in Plotinus 1992, XXIV), and to the negative theology of Nicholas of Cusa (Carrera 2013, 146).[246] There are indeed some similarities with the concept of God in the mystical Western tradition (see Abhayānandasarasvatī 2002).[247] The same, interestingly, applies to Sartre: 'the parallels between the mystical conception of God and the transcendent *néant* of Sartrean consciousness are striking' (Howells 1981, 550; see also Bradley 2004, 20). But in the case of Leopardi, such analogies do not reach far. While the God of negative theology remains logically possible in Leopardi, it holds no existential significance. God is confined to the realm of logical possibility – just like the infinite, or the idealised Lady of *Alla sua donna*. A form of tension toward God, and toward the true Infinite is impossible to exclude from Leopardi's writings (see Costa 2024), and in this sense he is still *platonicus* (see Cacciari 2005). Yet these remain at the stage of tension, of question (Negri 1997, 85), or protest (Binni 1973): the notion of a personal God is to be excluded. As David Jérôme puts it, in Leopardi 'il n'est pas un Dieu artisan, ni même un Dieu créateur ou personnel' (2021, 188). What happens in Leopardi is really what Paola Cori has called a 'naturalization of religion', that is a 'resetting of a new

[246] See in particular Cusa's *Trialogus de possest* (1460 in Cusa 2018, XI/2, 659) and *Dialogus de Deo abscondito* (1444-45 in Cusa 2018, passim). See many other similarities between Leopardi and Nicholas of Cusa in Bigongiari 1976.
[247] Sergio Givone also mentions Meister Eckhart and Angelo Silesio as other mystical references important for Leopardi (see Givone 1995, 147).

philosophical posture which induced his own system of nature and the religious natural system to merge in a formal overlapping' (Cori 2019, 94). Leopardi levels religion down to nature, and at this level the Spinozian equivalence *Deus sive natura* still applies to his philosophy. Leopardi's naturalisation is extreme, however, to the point of making God vanish into the material, where nothing spiritual is to be found anymore. Leopardi's naturalisation ultimately becomes atheism, where *Deus sive nihil* more correctly applies. Faith in God is not Leopardi's answer to the problem of existence, as it is, for example, for Kierkegaard or Dostoevsky.

9. Giacomo Leopardi, atheist existentialist

Leopardi is the initiator of atheistic existentialism, just as Kierkegaard is of religious existentialism.

The tragic character of existence in the existentialism of Leopardi and Sartre is due to the absence of the object the human being desires: the infinite for Leopardi and the in-itself for-itself for Sartre. The infinite happiness and the totality of being sought by these thinkers amount, in essence, to God.[248] Given the clear impossibility for us to be God, the best possible scenario would be to receive immortality from God. In this sense, God represents the only chance for human beings to truly be something, i.e., to be immortal.[249] No existentialist has insisted on this idea more than Miguel de Unamuno: 'whatever is not eternal is also not real' (Unamuno 1972, 44).[250] To support his point, Unamuno cites Leopardi as the perfect example (1972, 50 and passim). It thus becomes clear that, if God is rejected by the atheist existentialists (Leopardi included), it is certainly not out of convenience.[251] More likely, atheism is where their philosophical reflections led them.

It is therefore evident why the loss of God is tragic, and 'Leopardi […] non può che giudicarla con il rimpianto di una perdita irrimediabile' (Damiani in Leopardi 1997b, 3396). This feeling is shared by virtually all atheist existentialists. Nietzsche's madman in *The Gay Science*, for example, far from being gay or happy, is actually desperate for

[248] In the famous passage (*Zib*. 3497 ff.) where eternal life is declared unfit for our finite condition, unthinkable and thus undesirable, Leopardi falls into one of his most blatant contradictions. Critics who deny this (such as Tilgher 1940) do not take the theory of pleasure seriously. The importance of God in Sartre's philosophy is reiterated by Gillespie 2013 and 2016, who compellingly argues for an absence/presence of God in Sartre.

[249] The implicit premise here is that existence can be truly meaningful only if it is infinite. The aim of this section is to show that Leopardi shares this belief with many existentialists (see Buben 2022, 14). However, there are also some that disagree, like, for example, Simone de Beauvoir, who seeks to prove the opposite thesis in *All men are mortal* (1946 see Beauvoir 1995).

[250] 'Lo que no es eterno tampoco es real' (Unamuno 1983, 92).

[251] The variable of convenience is made part of the debate on faith in God by Pascal in his wager argument.

the death of God: 'how can we console ourselves, the murderers of all murderers!' he cries (Nietzsche 2001, § 125).[252] As Paolo Stellino observes, the 'normative and axiological void, which follows from the death of God […] is far from being Nietzsche's desired state or goal' (2015, 227). Of course, no one denies immortality more fiercely than Nietzsche, yet he still needs existence to be infinite and meaningful.[253] Heidegger famously declared that 'only a God can save us' (Heidegger 1993, 107)[254] – save us, that is, from finitude and meaninglessness. Now, whether our desire for the Infinite/God constitutes evidence of the existence of such Infinite/God is another matter, which cannot be pursued here.[255] Atheist existentialists philosophically deny God but they suffer for His absence, as the human being is essentially desire, lack of God. This should not be understood in any specifically religious sense, but only as the recognition, in Leopardi, Nietzsche, and Sartre that God is the only possible means for human beings to attain what they desire.[256]

This is not to say that atheist existentialists are rationalist: nowhere in existentialism will one find rational proofs of God's existence. Even religious existentialists acknowledge the impossibility of a rational foundation for belief in God. To believe one must go beyond reason – what Kierkegaard famously termed the 'leap of faith' in his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* ([1846] 2009, 15). Still, faith is the only path that promises true happiness, as it alone achieves God, however obscurely. As Alistair Hannay explains, 'the leap is the logical distance between any accumulation of true empirical, or

[252] 'Wie trösten wir uns, die Mörder aller Mörder?' (Nietzsche 2021, vol. III, § 125).
[253] In other works, Nietzsche contradicts this claim, arguing that a meaningful existence needs not be infinite. But this is not what the madman's behaviour suggests. Paul S. Loeb (2017, 90), for example, claims fascinatingly that Nietzsche's famous theory of the eternal recurrence of the same is an implicit attempt to rescue immortality.
[254] 'Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten' (Heidegger 1976).
[255] Kierkegaard strongly advocates for a 'yes' in *The Sickness unto Death* (1983) and so does Unamuno in *The Tragic Sense of Life* (1972); Leopardi denies it in *Zib*. 179.
[256] This line of inquiry cannot be brought any further here, but see a more comprehensive analysis of existentialism and desirability of immortality in Buben 2022.

"historical", statements and the necessary or eternal truths of reason' (Hannay 1999, 98). To 'make the leap of faith' means then to 'leap' to the conclusion that God exists without any rational grounds. Among those who took the leap are – alongside Kierkegaard – Dostoevsky, Unamuno, Jaspers, Chestov, and Marcel. Atheist existentialists are commonly considered Nietzsche, Sartre, Camus, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Beauvoir.[257] As for Leopardi, an unbiased reading of his works reveals elements in both directions: at times he speaks against God and traditional religion, at other he seems to defend them. The scholarship reflects the coexistence of these two tendencies in Leopardi, though recent interpretations tend to incline toward Leopardi's atheism (see an account of the issue in Veronese and Williams 2013). My analyses lead me to conclude that Leopardi belongs more fittingly to the atheist category than to the Christian one, especially given the anti-Christian tone of his later works (see Tilgher 1940, 87).

It is sometimes claimed that Leopardi never explicitly denied the existence of God.[258] This must be acknowledged as one of the most difficult problems in Leopardi Studies. I shall therefore limit myself to drawing attention to a passage of the *Zibaldone* which clearly, albeit not straightforwardly, denies God's existence:

> Quando diciamo che l'anima è spirito, non diciamo altro se non che ella non è materia, e pronunziamo in sostanza una negazione, non un'affermazione. Il che è quanto dire che *spirito* è una parola senza idea, come tante altre. […] E quel che dico dell'anima dico degli altri enti immateriali, compreso il Supremo (*Zib*. 4111. 11 luglio 1824).

The words 'anima' and 'spirito' are mental constructions that correspond to no real idea, let alone any real object. These words are like 'un corpo che non sia largo nè profondo nè

[257] On Jaspers and Heidegger there is some critical disagreement, which, however, falls beyond the scope of this project.

[258] Veronese and Williams, for example, write that Leopardi 'was not a positive atheist, not someone who believes that God does not exist, for on that metaphysical question, when speaking about the invisible world, it would be impossible to say one way or the other. He was an *a*theist in the etymological sense of the word, a negative atheist, someone without a belief in God, without a belief in a supreme personal being who is distinct from the world, and Creator of the world' (Veronese and Williams 2013, xxiv-xxv).

lungo, e simili immaginazioni della lingua piuttosto che del pensiero' (*Zib*. 4253. 9 marzo 1827). The same applies to the 'ente Supremo', unmistakably God. 'God' is just a word referring to no real object. Moreover, it should always be born in mind that Leopardi explicitly rejects a Christian reading of his works in the famous letter to De Sinner: 'voi dite benissimo ch'egli è assurdo l'attribuire ai miei scritti una tendenza religiosa' (A L. De Sinner, Firenze, 24 maggio 1832).[259]

In any case, a meticulous assessment of all of Leopardi's statements about God and religion to try and establish his belief in the existence of God or lack thereof would probably miss the point. What is decisive, in my view, is that God is *not* the source of meaning of existence in Leopardi's worldview, as He is for religious thinkers. And if God is not that, then His existence becomes a mere exercise in logic. For Leopardi, as for Nietzsche, Sartre, and Camus, existence is inexplicable, absurd, and ill-suited to human beings. A believer may see life as difficult, but never as ultimately finite and meaningless. Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, and Unamuno, for example, while never concealing the hardships of faith, accepted God, and existence, however mysteriously, had a meaning for them. This cannot be said of Leopardi, and this is what most clearly separates him from them.

Leopardi's atheistic existentialism becomes especially evident at the end of the *Zibaldone*: 'è naturale all'uomo […] il supporre, il figurarsi, il fingere anco gratuitamente un senno, una sagacità […] superiore alla propria' (*Zib*. 4229. 9 dicembre 1826). This is how the idea of God was first conceived of, according to Leopardi. This tendency is

> una delle cagioni per cui tanto universalmente e così volentieri si è abbracciata e tenuta, come ancor si tiene, la opinione di un Dio provvidente, cioè di un ente superiore a noi di

[259] I instead completely subscribe to Williams's position in this regard: 'it is certainly justifiable to describe Leopardi as a negative atheist but harder to affirm his positive atheism and wrong to use the word 'atheist' in any glib sense if it ignored Christianity as a "fertilising principle" in his work, his religious education, his knowledge of religious texts, and the rest, or if it gave too static impression of his philosophy, or glossed over the entries Christianity in the *Zibaldone*' (Williams 2015, 274-75).

> senno e intelletto, il qual disponga ogni nostro caso, e indirizzi ogni nostro affare, e nella cui provvidenza possiamo riposarci dell'esito delle cose nostre (*Zib*. 4230. 9 dicembre 1826).

Human beings are naturally inclined to delegate their decisions to a supernatural power, to free themselves from anguish. The verb 'fingere', also used in *L'infinito*, clearly suggests the arbitrary character of this mental creation, which is 'manifestamente falsa o senza niuna apparente ragione' (ibid.). In the same pages, Leopardi describes how he himself used to delegate his anxieties to his father, as to a 'provvidenza' (*Zib*. 4230). Earlier in the *Zibaldone*, God is interestingly called, in a *hapax*, 'Padrone dell'esistenza' (*Zib*. 606. 4 febbraio 1821). By the end of these reflections, Leopardi concludes that each one of us is in fact the only 'padrone' of their own existence. This delegation of responsibility is what Beauvoir calls 'seriousness'. She writes that children have the tendency to treat values as objectively true. As adults, however, we risk perpetuating this delegating attitude, dissimulating our freedom 'under the shield of rights which emanate from the ethical universe recognized […in] a father, a boss, a member of the Christian Church or the Communist Party' (Beauvoir 2018, 26).[260]

The realisation that each of us is responsible for their own existence emerges clearly in *Al Conte Carlo Pepoli*, a poem which should regarded as one of Leopardi's most philosophically powerful texts. The poem observes that we tend to relinquish responsibility to someone else: 'il viver nostro all'altrui mano / Provveder commettiamo' (ll. 44-45). Yet, we cannot really do that, since living is a need 'cui provveder non puote / Altri che noi' (ll. 46-47). No wealth, power, or authority can relieve us of the burden of existing and determining our own fate (ll. 50-53). Even when we try to numb ourselves with worldly divertissements, Pascal would say, or 'dilute' our freedom into facticity,

[260] 'sous l'armure de droits qui émanent de l'univers éthique reconnu […en] un père, un chef, un membre de l'Église chrétienne ou du Parti communiste' (Beauvoir 1947, 69).

Sartre and Heidegger would say, we remain trapped in the condition of freedom. In the poem, Leopardi depicts a young man who attempts to escape the need to live and determine the course of our life:

> Lui delle vesti e delle chiome il culto
> E degli atti e dei passi, e i vani studi
> Di cocchi e di cavalli, e le frequenti
> Sale, e le piazze romorose, e gli orti,
> Lui giochi e cene e invidiate danze
> Tengon la notte e il giorno; a lui dal labbro
> Mai non si parte il riso.
> (ll. 63-69)

This young man seeks to neutralise his desire for the infinite with worldly pleasures – with the inauthentic life of the 'they' (Heidegger 1996, § 27). But the human condition is inescapable: 'ahi, ma nel petto, / Nell'imo petto, grave, salda, immota / Come colonna adamantina, siede / Noia immortale' (ll. 69-72), against which the most intense pleasures are powerless.

That the idea of God arises in us from a need and is therefore probably false is Ludwig Feuerbach's thesis in *The Essence of Christianity* ([1841] 2012). This idea deeply influenced Schopenhauer and Nietzsche (Lubac 1995, 43), and later existentialists like Buber and Merleau-Ponty (Gooch 2024). Nietzsche, for example, agrees with Leopardi in asserting that rather than humanity being God's mistake, God is humanity's (Nietzsche 2008, I, § 7).[261] This idea is very much present in Leopardi: 'tolta la religione e le illusioni radicalmente, ogni uomo, anzi ogni fanciullo alla prima facoltà di ragionare […] si ucciderebbe infallibilmente di propria mano' (*Zib*. 216. 18-20 agosto 1820). In his *Diary*, Dostoevsky notes something similar: 'when the idea of the immortality is lost, suicide becomes an absolute and inescapable necessity for any person who has even developed

[261] The same epistemological mistake occurs when we arbitrarily invent chimeric references like 'fate' or 'fortune' to account for evil. All there is, in fact, is chance, for Leopardi (*Zib*. 208 and 4070).

slightly above the animal level' (1994, vol. I, 736). In *Devils* (1873), Dostoevsky has his character Kirillov asserting: 'the only thing man has done is to keep inventing God to go on living and not kill himself; this alone constitutes global history up to now' (2008, 692).[262] We then find this idea more or less everywhere in existentialism, in Camus (1975, 34), in Sartre (2020, 491 and 735), and even in Unamuno (1972, 168) who, like Dostoevsky, argued that the origin of the idea of God in human need does not necessarily invalidate it. But it is now time to summarise the main points of this chapter:

1. There is no fixed human nature: our essence is not decided by a God but is the result of habituation and is capable of developing in unforeseeable directions.
2. The precedence of existence over essence applied to human beings results in their inescapable freedom.
3. Notably original in European intellectual history is Leopardi's existential protest against the absence of meaning in existence.
4. The human tendency to feign a supreme being to offset existential anxiety is flawed. God is more likely an illusion born of this tendency, and we are the only ones responsible for how we choose to live our existence.

These points make Leopardi the initiator of atheistic existentialism.

[262] The reading of *Devils* left a strong impression in Nietzsche. For his relationship with Dostoevsky see Stellino 2015.

3. *Forging Existential Meaning through Poetry*

Abstract

The philosophy of Leopardi and the existentialists takes shape as a response to the problem of the absurd: how should we react to a world devoid of meaning? Since existence is absurd and irrational, reason is not the appropriate tool to understand it. Poetry and imagination reach much farther. Leopardi and the existentialists suggest that we must create our own subjective truths through poetry – truths that may be logically and objectively false, but emotionally and subjectively true. In this way, we can live a meaningful existence.

Τά μέγιστα τῶν ἀγαθών ἡμῖν γίγνεται διά μανίας.
Only by embracing some madness can we experience the most invaluable things.
(Plato, *Phaedrus*)

We feel that even when all *possible* scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life have still not been touched at all.
(Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*)

When something apparently irrational occurs – such as the death of an innocent child – the world has no rational explanation to offer. We usually expect such an event to be only seemingly irrational, only to find that its apparent irrationality proves real. We can endure pain, Nietzsche notes, and even take pleasure in enduring it, provided that we have a clear reason to do so – provided that our pain serves a higher purpose (Nietzsche 2016, § 28). But meaninglessness we cannot bear. And yet, the world leads us to conclude exactly that: existence is meaningless. The absence of an intrinsic and universal meaning,

however, also has a positive effect: if we are not bound by any pre-existing meaning, we are allowed to create our own, subjective one. Reason perceives objective meaninglessness, but the irrational within us can create meaningfulness through poetry.

1. The shipwreck of reason: Leopardi and Jaspers

The irrational precedes the rational: reason ultimately fails as a tool for fully understanding existence.

In his *Introduzione all'esistenzialismo*, Cornelio Fabro identifies existence with the irrational component of the world, and essence with the rational one: 'l'irrazionale è il singolo come persona, l'esistenza. Il razionale è l'essenza' (1943, I). That existence is irrational is also what the *Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese* shows, by presenting Nature as a blind, deaf, and deadly force. The single individual is also irrational in the sense that it cannot be reduced to any prior category (the supposedly innate idea of Human Being); and if we use 'tracing back to a prior category' as a definition of understanding, we must conclude that the individual – to the limit – cannot be understood. In this sense the individual is irrational. Because they are free, their actions are unforeseeable, and – to the limit – unintelligible.

Now, by virtue of the existentialist principle, existence precedes essence; and if existence is the irrational, and essence is the rational, then *the irrational precedes the rational*. Also, if existence is intrinsically irrational, then reason is not the correct tool to understand it. In their entire work, Leopardi and the existentialists aim to show how weak reason is, not only to understand existence, but also to make us happy. Throughout

existentialist literature, there is a whole metaphorology of the 'shipwreck of reason' (Jaspers 1967): existentialism is the philosophy of the shipwreck of reason *par excellence*.

The shipwreck of reason is one of the key ideas of Jaspers's philosophy, for whom it represents a universal feature of the human condition (Corrington 1987, 72). In *Philosophical Faith and Revelation* (1962), Jaspers argues that only in the shipwreck of reason and in the acknowledgement of the ultimate inexplicability of existence can one really 'experience being', that is, achieve an authentic existence (Jaspers 1967). He claims that the task of his time is to ground reason back into existence itself, which is to say into the irrational. This need, he continues, was felt by Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Pascal and Dostoevsky. To this list, we should add the Italian existentialist Nicola Abbagnano, who wrote *Le sorgenti irrazionali del pensiero* (1923), and, of course, Leopardi. Walter Kaufmann notes that, unlike the great philosophers of the past, Jaspers insists that philosophy begins precisely where reason fails – where it shipwrecks (see Kaufmann 1975, 30).

Leopardi famously describes the shipwreck of thought in *L'infinito*. He does not say it is reason specifically that suffers shipwreck; it is rather 'il pensier' (l. 14), but clearly the two notions are very close. Understood in Jaspers's terms, 'the immensity' of existence, 'the eternity of time', 'the past', 'the present and its sound' are accessible only on the condition of abandoning reason and going beyond what I can think and perceive clearly and distinctly (cf. Descartes). Leopardi's shipwreck is thus the shipwreck of reason, which is necessary to attain the great sea of being and engage with it authentically.[263] The power of this comparison between Leopardi and Jaspers lies in the fact that they both

[263] The comparison Leopardi-Jaspers promises many more fascinating discoveries, perhaps starting from Jaspers's notion of limit-situations (It. 'scacco esistenziale'). In *Il pensiero poetante* (2006), Antonio Prete titles his analysis of *L'infinito* 'Lo scacco del pensiero', probably referring Jaspers, who made the notion famous. Also, Pamela Williams uses Jaspers's notion of philosophical faith to define Leopardi's relationship with religion (2015, 271).

frame shipwreck as sweet rather than tragic, as the philosophical tradition had framed it hitherto. This is one of the first times in the history of Western thought when, by losing our reason, we can find something meaningful and beautiful. In fact, Leopardi and Jaspers suggest that *only by* abandoning our reason for a while can we find something truly meaningful and beautiful. The metaphor of thought as an unstable raft always at risk of shipwreck is a major *topos* in Western philosophy, from Plato's *Phaedo* to Nietzsche's *Gay Science* and Camus' *Myth of Sisyphus*. But the originality of Leopardi and Jaspers lies in their re-signification of this metaphor, framing shipwreck as a philosophically positive event. Cartesian clarity and distinctness are not always synonymous with understanding the world, they argue: the collapse of rationality may in fact bring us closer to the truth, which is, however, clearly a new kind of truth – a truth of the heart, that is, rather than a rational one.

For Leopardi, the endpoint of rational knowledge is madness. Those who truly focus on the truth cannot avoid falling into madness, because the truth is the nothingness of existence: 'chi si fissasse nella considerazione e nel sentimento continuo del nulla verissimo e certissimo delle cose, […] sarebbe pazzo assolutamente e per ciò solo' (*Zib*. 103-04. 20 gennaio 1820). Such knowledge can lead to inaction, and ultimately, to suicide. Yet, no existentialist advocated or committed suicide. If suicide is where reason leads us, they argue, we must turn to the irrational for a new foundation of life. Any action, by its very nature, is thus performed against reason – by virtue of forgetfulness and distraction (see Aloisi 2023) – to the point that the very *writing* endeavour acquires the 'redemptive role by offering the possibility, albeit only intermittently, of distraction from truth' (Cori 2019, 221). This observation surfaces early in the *Zibaldone* (14), around 1818 (Priore 2024). It usually occurs to the great minds to go mad out of an excessive use of reason, Leopardi observes. The two great mad men of the *Zibaldone* are

Tasso and Pascal (see *Zib*. 1176-78 and 3245). Leopardi thus advocates for a return to the ancient mythologies to counteract the modern one of reason. In the words of Franco D'Intino, Leopardi combats

> la sostituzione delle 'ultime mitologie' (quella platonica, quella cristiana e quella, ultimissima, della razionalità moderna) alle prime e più 'antiche mitologie', che aveva raccolto nel *Saggio* [*sopra gli errori popolari degli antichi* – author's note]. Le 'ultime' sono dalla parte della verità (e, più in generale, della mente e dell'astratto), le 'prime' dalla parte del piacere (e, più in generale, del corpo e dei sensi) (2009a, 120-21).

Leopardi calls for the substitution of truth with beauty, of abstract with concrete, of essence with existence, and, ultimately, of philosophy with poetry. In *La caduta e il ritorno* (2019), D'Intino describes Leopardi's philosophy as the fall from an original state of happiness into a state of hyper-reason, and the attempted return to the original, pre-rational state of happiness. D'Intino frames this fall and return in the contexts of Romanticism, but it in the context of existentialism it works just as well: moderns have fallen into the rational realisation of the vanity of existence and must now return to the original happiness through the recreation of illusions/values.

The problem of the meaning of existence concerns Leopardi in the form of 'why do we go on living after knowing the nothingness of existence?' This question echoes through the *Canto notturno*: 'se la vita è sventura, / perchè da noi si dura?' (ll. 55-56). In the *Zibaldone* Leopardi often recommends suicide as the solution to the problem of existence. He *writes* so, and yet he sets his pen down and goes on with his life, awaiting the next illusion to warm up his heart again. Plotinus saves Porphyry's life in the name of friendship and love, that is, in the name of sweet illusions. The life of the reader who might approach the text in Plotinus' same existential condition of boredom is, in a way, saved by the text itself, who *appears* to be recommending suicide, and yet ultimately

rejects it. In this sense, poetry can save a life. The *Dialogo di Plotino e di Porfirio* is Leopardi's ultimate rejection of suicide.[264]

[264] The most famous rejection of suicide in existentialism is Camus' *Myth of Sisyphus* (1942 in Camus 1975).

2. Application to epistemology: the irrational is also within us

Applied to epistemology, the existentialist principle entails that we know irrationally before we know rationally. This, existentially speaking, is encouraging, since it is our irrational side that creates meaning.

Leopardi identifies existence with nature, at least when 'nature' is understood as Lucretius and, later, D'Holbach understood it – that is, as the set of all existing things.[265] By virtue of this identification, we can now conclude that saying that reason fails to comprehend existence is equivalent to saying that reason fails to comprehend nature. This conclusion is confirmed by the centrality of the reason/nature antithesis in Leopardi's work. Luporini underlines that Leopardi associates 'philosophy', 'knowledge', 'barbarism' with reason, and 'virtue', 'beauty', 'poetry', 'happiness', and 'illusions' with nature (Luporini 1996, 39-40).

The word 'nature', however, requires caution, as it carries multiple meanings in Leopardi.

1. On the one hand, 'nature' does simply mean 'existence' (see *Zib*. 3814). According to most scholars, this first meaning splits into two further connotations: 'natura benigna' and 'natura matrigna' (Blasucci 2004).[266]

2. Yet 'nature' is also sometimes used to refer to human nature specifically, which in turn has two further connotations: the primitive, positively-connotated nature, tied to illusions, beauty, and happiness; and the second, negatively-connotated nature, synonymous with reason and nothingness.

[265] For the coincidence of nature and existence see: 'quello che noi chiamiamo natura non è principalmente altro che l'esistenza, l'essere, la vita, sensitiva o non sensitiva, delle cose' (*Zib*. 3814. 31 ottobre 1823).
[266] Recently, Gilberto Lonardi has sought to overcome the traditional contrast between a benign and a malign nature (see Lonardi 2024).

The two meanings are linked in the following way: if nature is viewed through the lens of illusions (our first nature), it appears benign, and we have the first connotation of the first meaning – 'natura benigna'. Conversely, if nature is viewed through the lens of reason (our second nature), it appears malign, and we have the second connotation of the first meaning – 'natura matrigna'. The contrast between reason and nature, described by Luporini, understands 'nature' in the first connotation of the second meaning, so the positively-connotated nature within us.[267]

Just as our first nature precedes our second, so nature in general (understood as existence) precedes reason. In Leopardi's words: 'la ragione […] è posteriore alla natura, e da lei dipendente, ed ha in lei sola il fondam. e il soggetto della sua esistenza, e del suo modo di essere' (*Zib*. 1842. 4 ottobre 1821).[268] For human beings, this means that nature, with all its irrationalities, precedes all our rational attempts to make sense of it, to capture it into essences, and to give it meaning. Note that in this precedence of nature over reason, 'nature' can be understood in both its two meanings outlined above: nature/existence precedes reason and its attempts to fix existence into essences; and our natural part, our inner nature, precedes our reason. In this chapter, we are more concerned with nature understood as human nature, as the irrational within us, but the two always logically co-occur, and it is no coincidence they are called the same.

The most obvious instance of our nature preceding our reason is the case of children, who are, according to Leopardi, completely natural. As they grow up, they reach what Sartre calls 'the age of reason' (1961): they develop rational faculties, and thus their second, negatively-connotated nature, and thus unhappiness. The same applies, claims

[267] Other times, 'nature' simply refers to natural elements, to God, or to nothingness (cf. Chapter 2 section 8).
[268] Leopardi also asserts repeatedly that nature is superior to reason (see *Zib*. 168 and passim). This is because nature is more originary than reason.

Leopardi, to the history of humanity as a whole: ancient peoples were farther from reason and knowledge and, because of that, happier. They were closer to their natural part, their illusions, and even to natural elements.

Existence precedes essence and nature precedes reason: this notion of 'precedence' is always understood both chronologically and ontologically. In the *Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese*, for example, Nature precedes the Icelander chronologically, in the sense that it already existed before the Icelander was born, she was there already when he arrived, and she certainly outlives him. Yet Nature also holds ontological priority over the Icelander, insofar as she clearly determines the rules of his existence. The variables of rational and irrational align seamlessly: Nature is an irrational, unintelligible force; the Icelander, on the other hand, embodies reason insofar as he asks for a rational explanation of the meaning of existence. The variable of essence emerges perhaps more clearly in the *Canto notturno*, where the shepherd asks the moon what his essence is: 'ed io che sono?' (89). The moon embodies irrationality insofar as it does not respond to the shepherd, and like Nature, exists before and outlives him. The shepherd, like the Icelander, needs a rational explanation of what he is and of what is the meaning of his existence. But they both receive no explanation. The precedence of nature over reason underpins *L'infinito* as well. The poet 'compares' the infinite silence of nature with his own voice. 'Comparare' is here quite a rational process – comparison is, after all, at the basis of scientific measurement. That the poet's 'voice', his 'comparison', and his 'thought' are linked with reason becomes clear when we realise that 'voice', 'comparison', and 'thought' can all be considered translations of one word: λόγος. Thought/reason, after all, could not suffer shipwreck anywhere but in the irrational/nature. As one can easily see, this precedence of existence/nature over essence/reason can be fruitfully applied to many of Leopardi's texts and understood as their theoretical foundation.

The idea that the irrational precedes the rational characterises existentialism in general, even beyond Jaspers. Heidegger intended to signify this precedence when he famously claimed, in *What is Metaphysics?* (1929), that 'the idea of "logic" itself disintegrates in the turbulence of a more originary questioning' (in Heidegger 1998, 92) – a questioning which cannot but be non-logical.[269] This applies first and foremost to the dreadful experience of nothingness: 'for Heidegger, our experience of nothingness is prior to logic' (Renaudie 2023, 275). The most fitting reference, when it comes to the precedence of the irrational over the rational, is Miguel de Unamuno, who made the irrational the very basis of his philosophy. Unamuno's main target is Hegel and idealism in general:

> Hegel made famous his aphorism that all the rational is real and all the real rational; but there are many of us who, unconvinced by Hegel, continue to believe that the real, the really real, is irrational, that reason builds upon irrationalities (1972, 7-8).[270]

The 'many of them' are Leopardi and the existentialists.[271] Unamuno reverses Hegel's position in quite a Leopardian fashion: 'everything vital is […] irrational, […] and everything rational is anti-vital' (Unamuno 1972, 39).[272]

The antithesis reason/nature was a major theme in the 17th- and 18th-century debates, to which Leopardi adds a new variable – that of 'vitalità' (Luporini 1996, 40). If life can only be sustained through errors and illusions, Leopardi claims, long live errors and illusions. Toni Negri, for instance, defines the notion of illusion in Leopardi beautifully as the 'radice vigorosissima della vita' (1987, 78). That life originates in error is one of the great themes of *The Gay Science* (see Colli 1980, 99) and *Beyond Good and Evil*. For Nietzsche, 'the falsity of a judgement' is not in itself 'an objection to a judgement'; the

[269] 'Die Idee der "Logik" selbst löst sich auf im Wirbel eines ursprünglicheren Fragens' (Heidegger 1965, 37).
[270] Hégel hizo célebre su aforismo de que todo lo racional es real y todo lo real racional; pero somos muchos los que, no convencidos por Hégel, seguimos creyendo que lo real, lo realmente real, es irracional; que la razón construye sobre irracionalidades (1983, 61).
[271] Through the works of Unamuno, Leopardi contributed to define many aspects of existentialism, including the notion of irrational.
[272] 'todo lo vital es […] irracional, y todo lo racional, anti-vital' (1983, 88).

question is 'how far the judgement promotes and preserves life' (Nietzsche 2002, § 4). For Nietzsche, 'the falsest judgements […] are the most indispensable to us […], a renunciation of false judgement would be a renunciation of life' (ibid.).[273] Leopardi writes that 'può applicarsi ad ogni genere di viventi, quel verso del Tasso (Gerus. 1. 3.) *E da l'inganno sua vita riceve*' (*Zib*. 3761. 23 ottobre 1823; italics in the original).

The unexpected appearance of the irrational occurs most strikingly in two texts: *Il Risorgimento* and the *Dialogo di Plotino e di Porfirio*. *Il Risorgimento* is crucial, first of all, from a biographical point of view, as it marks the rebirth of the cherished illusions that had seemed to Leopardi lost forever. This must have led him to realise that, if illusions had once come back to life, they could do so again. The way in which reason and illusion interact in this text is well explained by Franco D'Intino:

> *Il Risorgimento* è un testo di un nichilismo assoluto, radicale, epperò smentito, nelle ultime due strofette, da un inspiegabile, irrazionale moto di vitalità ('l'ardor natio') che viene dal 'cor', al quale l'io si rivolge per celebrare, appunto, il suo risorgimento *nonostante tutto* (2022, 108; italics in the original).

D'Intino also underlines the importance of the irrational in Leopardi's texts more generally: 'è un fatto, […] che laddove valuta il ruolo del Cristianesimo nel passaggio dall'antico al moderno, dall'irrazionale al razionale, Leopardi propende decisamente per il primo polo' (2022, 119). Whether the irrational can be considered Leopardi's last word, however, is a different problem, which is investigated in section 8.

[273] 'Die Falschheit eines Urtheils ist uns noch kein Einwand gegen ein Urtheil; […] Die Frage ist, wie weit es lebenfördernd, lebenserhaltend […]. Die falschesten Urtheile […] uns die unentbehrlichsten sind, […] daß der Verzicht auf falsche Urtheile ein Verzicht auf Leben wäre' (Nietzsche 2021, vol. V, § 4).

2.1 'Irrational' and 'irrationalism'

Relinquishing reason for life-prompting illusions is an irrationalist position. The concern I would like to address here is the following: is the notion of 'irrational' applicable to Leopardi?

The *Dizionario della lingua italiana* edited by Paolo Costa and Francesco Cardinali (1819-1826) defines 'irrazionale' as something which 'non ha ragione, incapace di ragione' (Costa and Cardinali 1819-1826, s.v. 'irrazionale'), and presents 'irragionevole' as synonymous with it. In the dictionary examples, the term is mainly used to designate animals. Subsequent philosophical language preferred 'irrazionale', but, according to this dictionary – the only one truly contemporary to Leopardi – 'irrazionale' and 'irragionevole' do not display significant differences and can thus be treated as synonymous.

Leopardi does not use the term 'irrazionale', but only 'irragionevole'. He does employ it to designate beings that lack reason, like animals and children, but also, other times, to designate something that is contrary to reason.[274] The latter meaning is recorded by subsequent dictionaries, like the Tommaseo-Bellini (1861-1874, s.v. 'irragionevole'). In Leopardi, when referred to nature, 'irrational' means 'absurd', 'incomprehensible'; when referred to human beings, it designates the non-rational part of us, i.e., our first nature.[275]

Now, how does 'irrational' relate to 'irrationalism'? 'Irrationalism' has acquired two main meanings throughout the history of philosophy (see Abbagnano 1971, s.v. 'irrazionalismo'; *Encyclopedia Britannica* 2012, s.v. 'irrationalism'; *Enciclopedia*

[274] Both these meanings are present, for instance, in the *Saggio sopra gli errori popolari degli antichi* (1815).
[275] 'Irragionevole' never occurs in the *Canti*, it occurs once in the *Operette* (*Dialogo di Plotino e di Porfirio*), and 18 times in the *Zibaldone*.

Treccani 2009, s.v. 'irrazionalismo'). The definition given by the *Encyclopedia Britannica* is particularly useful:

> Irrationalism implies either (in ontology) that the world is devoid of rational structure, meaning, and purpose; or (in epistemology) that reason is inherently defective and incapable of knowing the universe without distortion; or (in ethics) that recourse to objective standards is futile; or (in anthropology) that in human nature itself the dominant dimensions are irrational (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. 'irrationalism').

As one can see clearly, Leopardi's philosophy reflects the tenets of irrationalism quite precisely. According to the sources cited above, the tradition of irrationalism largely overlaps with the one of existentialism, including, above all others, philosophers like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Camus, and Sartre.

'Se l'umanità è imbarbarita raziocinando', D'Intino concludes, 'un nuovo orizzonte di senso può emergere, grazie ad amicizia e amore' (2022, 190). This is what happens in the *Dialogo di Plotino e di Porfirio*.

3. *Dialogo di Plotino e di Porfirio*: an irrationalist reading

The Dialogo di Plotino e di Porfirio offers an irrationalist solution to the problem of existence: even if life is meaningless, we should still live it – for the sake of our loved ones.

The *Dialogo di Plotino e di Porfirio* (1827) is a foundational text to understand the centrality of the notion of the irrational in Leopardi. If the text has a thesis, it is that life is worth living even if we rationally know it is meaningless – a thesis endorsed by subsequent existentialists such as Sartre and Camus. The dialogue is a reflection on suicide, dividing the problem into four key aspects: moral legitimacy (is suicide morally legitimate?); accordance with nature (is it in accordance with nature?); rationality (is it rational?); humanity (is it humane?). Porphyry advocates for suicide answering 'yes' to the first three questions: suicide is morally legitimate, in accordance with nature, and rational. Plotinus wins the debate only by answering 'no' to the fourth question.

Leopardi's framework of nature and reason as the two constituents of human nature finds a most striking parallel today in Daniel Kahneman's account of the brain. According to Kahneman, the human brain operates through two main pathways, which he calls System 1 and System 2 (2012). '*System 1*' writes Kahneman, 'operates automatically and quickly, with little or no effort and no sense of voluntary control; *System 2* allocates attention to the effortful mental activities that demand it, including complex computations' (2012, 16). System 1 corresponds to Leopardi's nature; system 2 to reason. System 1 often makes mistakes, producing what Kahneman calls 'cognitive illusions' (2012, 20) and 'biases' (2012, passim), but it is also associated with 'good mood, intuition, creativity, gullibility' (2012, 41). System 2 is more precise and is associated with rationality, but also with 'sadness, vigilance, suspicion, an analytic approach' (2012,

41). Analysing the dialogue through the lens of Kahneman's two systems proves especially illuminating.

Porphyry's argument for the moral legitimacy of suicide stems directly from the absurdity of existence: since we are thrown into this meaningless existence without consent (see *Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese*), how could it not be morally legitimate to take ourselves out of it? This argument is understandable only if we accept Leopardi's atheistic existentialism. If, on the contrary, we believed God to be responsible for our existence, who would dare question His will? Any questioning would result in the same end as Job's plight. Who would risk infinite punishment in hell for the fleeting suffering of this life? In Leopardi's words, 'come arrischiare l'infinito contro il finito?' (*Zib*. 818. 19 marzo 1821). But within the framework of Leopardi's atheistic existentialism, Porphyry's point holds: suicide is morally legitimate.

Next comes the question of the rationality of suicide. Porphyry claims that what leads human beings to choose life over death is a basic miscalculation, an 'error di computo' (*Dialogo di Plotino e di Porfirio*, 563). He reduces life to a mathematical problem: people make that miscalculation because they use System 1 when they should be using System 2. They are slaves to the illusion that life is worth anything, when, rationally speaking, it is not. Therefore, suicide is rational.

This brings us to the third point – whether suicide is in accordance with nature. Porphyry's argument hinges on the notion of 'second nature'. First nature is the one of the ancients, closer to our natural inclinations, and full of sweet illusions (Kahneman's System 1). Second nature is the one that takes over in modern humanity and is governed by reason (Kahneman's System 2). For Porphyry, suicide, while not in accordance with our first nature, is indeed in accordance with our second nature, as it is rationally justified.

And since it is our second nature, not our first one, that took over in modern humanity, suicide is in accordance with the kind of nature we have today.

It is on the fourth criterion – humanity – that Porphyry falls, as both characters agree that suicide is inhumane. The arguments of Plotinus on the first three questions are completely refuted. From a logical point of view, Plotinus can still be said to fail even on the fourth criterion. But logic is not the final word of the dialogue, and that is why Plotinus ultimately prevails. To prove the inhumanity of suicide, Plotinus employs five arguments, which are logically flawed and yet made winning by Leopardi. With this surprising move, Leopardi performs a replacement of reason with nature (our first nature) and of philosophy with poetry.

1. First argument (confirmation bias):

> Ecco, questo che tu nomini error di computo; pur si commette di continuo; e non dagli stupidi solamente e dagl'idioti, ma dagl'ingegnosi, dai dotti, dai saggi; e si commetterà in eterno, se la natura, […] e non già il raziocinio […] non lo spegne (564).

Everybody makes the mistake of preferring life to death, so it is not really a mistake: from a logical point of view, this is clearly flawed – it is labelled in psychology as 'confirmation bias'. Yet Plotinus taps into a deeper truth: he holds (correctly, even from the standpoint of contemporary psychology) that our 'first nature' is still present in modern humanity and ultimately prevails over our second nature. In the dialogue, humans' first nature is also called 'senso dell'animo', whereas second nature is 'intelletto'. It is the 'senso dell'animo', Plotinus argues, that prevails over the intellect: 'quel tal senso […] e non l'intelletto, è quello che ci governa' (564). System 1 precedes System 2, nature precedes reason, both chronologically and 'out of strength'. The same terms of 'immediacy', 'independency from reason', and 'chronological priority over reason' are used by

Kahneman to describe system 1 (2012, 11 and passim). Kahneman also declares that he is 'not optimistic about the potential for personal control of biases' (2012, 73), implicitly acknowledging the superior power of system 1 over system 2. Luporini claims that Leopardi's 'senso dell'animo' is a true 'conquista teorica', 'un atto immediatamente valutante, indipendentemente e prima dell'esercizio della ragione' (1998, 184).[276] The fact that second nature prevails does not make suicide the wrong choice from the point of view of reason, but it makes it inhumane – that is, contrary our truer and deeper nature. And that is all Plotinus cares about.

2. Second argument (mere exposure effect): we should think of friends and family before committing suicide. In the words of Plotinus: 'non vorremo noi avere alcuna considerazione degli amici; dei congiunti di sangue; dei figliuoli, dei fratelli, dei genitori, della moglie; delle persone familiari e domestiche, colle quali siamo usati di vivere da gran tempo […] ?' (565). This argument is what social psychology terms 'mere exposure effect' or 'familiarity principle', which is 'the tendency to express undue liking for things merely because of familiarity with them' (Bornstein and Crave-Lemley 2004, 215 ff.). Again, as an argument, it is logically flawed, but, if the point of view of reason is momentarily suspended, the argument holds since it makes us feel an attachment to life and to our loved ones.
3. Third argument (a true yet irrelevant consideration): Plotinus praises Porphyry's Stoic fortitude, yet states that it should be used to endure life's trials, not to abandon our loved ones. He underlines the reason why Stoic fortitude was born in the first place, and he does have a point in doing so (in a way, he is still

[276] A similar point is also made by Piero Bigongiari (1976, 419 ff.) and Cesare Galimberti (in Leopardi 1998b, 480).

appealing to the familiarity principle). However, Plotinus's reasoning fails because Porphyry does not *aim* at abandoning his loved ones – that is more of an unintended side-effect. This side-effect, however, does not invalidate the premise that life is not worth living when we assess our human condition rationally.

4. Fourth argument (mere exposure effect, again): Plotinus argues that suicide is an act of egoism. While this may be true, again it does not invalidate the truth and cogency of Porphyry's position.
5. Fifth argument (begging). Finally, Plotinus abandons logic entirely and his speech is all in the imperative and optative moods: '*pregatone* da un *amico*, perché non dovrebbe *compiacergliene*? Ora io ti *prego caramente*, Porfirio *mio*, *per la memoria degli anni* che fin qui è *durata* l'*amicizia nostra*, lascia cotesto pensiero' (566; italics mine). In italics are the words that embody Plotinus's biases: Plotinus is *begging* ('begging' and 'saying' are equivalent in logic) his *friend* (familiarity principle), and he is doing so *dearly* (an irrelevant adverb in logic), underlining *how much time* they have spent together ('sunk cost fallacy'). He goes on: '*vogli* piuttosto aiutarci a sofferir la vita'. Plotinus is asking Porphyry to *want*, not to *think*. Plotinus is trying to lead Porphyry into using system 1 instead of system 2 – the opposite, notably, of what Kahneman and colleagues advise when making important decisions. In normal circumstances, Leopardi would agree with Kahneman, but when system 2 is brought to an extreme it makes us see pointlessness in everything and turns existence into a nothingness. Plotinus realises that his friend is suffering from over-rationalisation, that he is 'in preda al "chiuso morbo" che ucciderà Silvia, la cui contentezza sarà distrutta dal suo essere "*pensosa*"' (D'Intino 2022, 177; italics in the original). Plotinus uses poetry to rescue his loved one: 'viviamo, Porfirio mio, e confortiamoci insieme'. This

> passage shows that poetry can save a life. Plotinus saves Porphry's life through poetry, by tapping into love, as it were, rather than thought. This can happen because our first nature, the 'senso dell'animo', is indeed stronger than our second nature (reason). This is what keeps us alive, and, to the extent that is possible, happy. 'Love' is perhaps more appropriate a word here than it first seems. Indeed, who does not see in Plotinus' words a clear echo of Catullus's apostrophe to his loved one? 'Viviamo, Porfirio mio, e confortiamoci'; 'Vivamus, mea Lesbia, atque amemus' (Catullus 2008, V, ll. 1-2).[277] Perhaps Franco D'Intino is not wrong after all in seeing a nuance of love in this text (D'Intino 2022). Leopardi decrees the victory of Plotinus over Porphyry, of the irrational of reason, of life over death. As in *L'infinito*, in this dialogue too, reason shipwrecks in the irrational, giving birth to life and meaning.

Ultimately, Porphyry and Plotinus agree that suicide is inhumane because they both agree that our first nature precedes our second nature, and therefore that nature is more originary than reason, existence more originary than essence. These two personas, which represent two opposing theoretical positions within Leopardi himself can ultimately agree because they agree on the fundamental premise that nature/existence precedes reason/essence. They can agree, that is, because Leopardi's thought is, at its core, existentialist.

In reference to the history of existentialism, Pattison and Kirkpatrick write that 'Nietzsche (like Kierkegaard) suggested to modernists at the turn of the century that the key to understanding human life was not theory, not intellect, logic, or systematic thought, but ecstatic participation in the flow of life itself' (Pattison and Kirkpatrick 2018, 18-19).

[277] Giovanni Getto detected other references to Catullus in the *Storia del genere umano* (see Getto 1966, 244, 249).

Once again, we should now put Leopardi next to Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, since that is what emerges in texts such as the *Dialogo di Plotino e di Porfirio*.

D'Intino notes that the 'senso dell'animo' is used as a cognitive tool early in the *Zibaldone* as well (2022, 172). If nature, writes Leopardi, 'ci fa piangere la morte dei figli, non è che per un'illusione, perchè perdendo la vita non hanno perduto nulla, anzi hanno guadagnato'. And yet 'il non piangerne è barbaro, e molto più il rallegrarsene, benchè sia conforme all'esatta ragione' (*Zib*. 356. 25 novembre 1820). Something which is rarely said about this 'senso dell'animo' is that this same faculty, opposed to reason, is used at the beginning of the *Zibaldone* as evidence of the 'spirituality' of the human being (*Zib*. 106-07. 15 aprile 1820). We know that these kinds of proofs are later dropped by Leopardi, but it is important to understand the link between this kind of knowledge and religion. Plotinus's currency is not logic, but our familiarity with things, how much we care about them, and how long they have been close to our heart.

The most relevant existentialist reference for the 'senso dell'animo', besides Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, is Dostoevsky. Indeed, by opening more or less randomly *The Brothers Karamazov*, one will find a relentless defence of life in Leopardi's same terms. In one of the most meaningful dialogues of the novel, Ivàn Karamazov says to his brother Alyosha: 'I have a longing for life, and I go on living in spite of logic' (2012, 366). Ivàn's currency too is the 'senso dell'animo':

> Though I may not believe in the order of the universe, yet I love the sticky little leaves as they open in spring. I love the blue sky, I love some people, whom one loves, you know, sometimes without knowing why. I love some great deeds done by men, though I've long ceased perhaps to have faith in them, yet from old habit one's heart prizes them (ibid.).

'Though I may not believe in the order of the universe' means 'even if I do not believe there is an ultimate meaning of existence', which is very closely linked to atheism for Dostoevsky. This is the existential condition of Porphyry at the beginning of the dialogue, i.e., boredom. 'Though I've long ceased perhaps to have faith in them' – a melancholic

remark widely shared by Leopardi.[278] 'Yet from old habit one's heart prizes them': that 'yet' is the rebirth of illusions of *Il Risorgimento*: 'Meco ritorna a vivere / La piaggia, il bosco, il monte / Parla al mio core il fonte, / Meco favella il mar' [ll. 97-100]). It is the rebirth of illusions, the old sweet errors, which often happens thanks to natural elements in both Dostoevsky and Leopardi. That 'yet' is the same concessive of the *Plotinus*:

> *ma contuttociò*, passato un poco di tempo, […] per cagioni menomissime e appena possibili a notare; rifassi il gusto alla vita, nasce or questa or quella speranza nuova, e le cose umane ripigliano quella loro apparenza, e mostransi non indegne di qualche cura; non veramente all'intelletto; ma sì, per modo di dire, al senso dell'animo (564; italics mine).

'It's not a matter of intellect or logic,' Ivàn concludes, 'it's loving with one's inside, with one's stomach' (Dostoevsky 2012, 366). We must love life, agrees Alyosha, 'love it, regardless of logic as you say, it must be regardless of logic' (Dostoevsky 2012, 367). The English rendering 'regardless of logic', however, masks an important detail: the original text reads 'прежде логики' ('prežde logiki'; see Dostoevsky 1973, 255), literally 'prior to logic' (see Dostoevsky 2008, 267), marking, again, the precedence of life/nature/existence over logic/reason/essence.

Leopardi, Dostoevsky, and the other existentialists all oppose the prejudice that intelligence equals rationality – a point that contemporary psychology now takes for granted (see for instance Stanovich 2010 and Gardner 2011). Leopardi goes even further by stating that rationality and strong illusions are both hallmarks of high intelligence: 'oggidì le menti superiori hanno questa proprietà che sono facilissime a concepire illusioni, e facilissime e prontissime a perderle, […] a concepirle, per la molta forza

[278] In the *Dialogo di Malambruno e Farfarello*, we find: 'Fa conto che vi sia de' diavoli da bene come v'è degli uomini' (167), i.e., none. The Icelander says: 'Tu dei sapere che io fino nella prima gioventù, a poche esperienze, fui persuaso e chiaro della vanità della vita, e della stoltezza degli uomini' (274). In *Il Parini*, we read: 'potrei qui nel principio distendermi lungamente sopra le emulazioni, le invidie, le censure acerbe, le calunnie, le parzialità, le pratiche e i maneggi occulti e palesi contro la tua riputazione, e gli altri infiniti ostacoli che la malignità degli uomini' (298). A general distrust in humanity is also the prevailing atmosphere in the *Dialogo di Timandro ed Eleandro*.

dell'immaginazione a perderle, per la molta forza della ragione' (*Zib*. 137. 26 giugno 1820). The conclusion Leopardi and the existentialists reach is that rationality is *not* the key element for an authentic and happy existence. We should instead turn to the imagination, the heart, and that form of art that embodies them: poetry.

4. Existentialism and analytic philosophy: different kinds of meaning

Logic and analytic philosophy allow only one kind of meaning: the scientific one. Existentialism challenges this view by analysing the single individual without renouncing meaningfulness.

In 1932, one of the fiercest pieces of criticism against the existentialist way of doing philosophy was published: *The Elimination of Metaphysics through Logical Analysis of Language* by Rudolf Carnap (see 1959, 60 ff.). This essay is an excellent starting point to understand why existentialism prefers poetry to logic. In Western culture there has always been a line of philosophers-writers closer to literature and a line of more 'technical' philosophers closer to logic. In the 20th century, the contrast between these two lines became more pronounced. On the first pole, one finds existentialism; on the second one, one finds the so-called analytic philosophy. Existentialists and their predecessors Carnap calls 'metaphysicians'. Carnap's thesis in his essay is that most claims made by metaphysicians are meaningless. He mentions Heidegger explicitly, but he would certainly agree to extend the charge of meaninglessness to existentialism in general. 'Metaphysics' is understood by Carnap in the Aristotelian sense – that is, as an intellectual endeavour seeking to establish truths beyond the domain of empirical experience. The propositions of metaphysics can be meaningless, Carnap goes on, in two ways: either syntactically, or semantically. In the first case, they are meaningless because they do not respect the rules of grammar: for example, the proposition 'I am', in Descartes' famous argument, does not say anything, as the verb 'to be' functions grammatically only when connected with a predicate (Carnap 1959, 74). For Carnap, 'to be' is not a predicate itself,

as also most logicians hold in the wake of Kant.[279] The sentence 'I am *a philosopher*', for example, contains a predicate and would thus be correct. Secondly, a proposition is semantically meaningless if it involves a word denoting no real objects: for example, the word 'nothingness'. When metaphysicians write about 'nothingness', says Carnap, their speech is actually empty, for the word 'nothingness' refers to no object in the real world. Because of its meaninglessness, Carnap concludes, metaphysics (i.e. existentialism) should be eliminated as an intellectual discipline altogether.[280]

Now, how is this helpful to understand existentialism? The point is that Carnap seems to acknowledge one kind of meaning only: the one that can be expressed by logic or science. What is certain is that existentialism does not always speak the language of logic. What needs to be proven is that the language of existentialism is nonetheless meaningful, albeit in its own peculiar way.

Existentialist propositions that might appear guilty of meaninglessness are expressions such as 'all is nothing', or 'I am nothing' (see *Zib*. 72). 'All is nothing' is in fact the greatest contradiction one can express in logic: not only because the word 'nothing' has no real referent, but because the proposition is an analytic contradiction, meaning that it is always false (at least according to the prevalent actualist approach in logic).[281] On the contrary, 'everything exists' is a tautology: ∀x exists(x). Therefore, the opposite proposition, 'nothing exists' or 'all is nothing' is a contradiction regardless of the meaning of x: ∀x ¬ exists(x) – there is no x such that x does not exist.

[279] That existence is not a real predicate was claimed by Kant in the context of refuting the ontological argument (see Kant 1998, B 626 ff.).
[280] Carnap's position should not be taken necessarily as representative of all analytic philosophy, as some contemporary analytic philosophers have rejected it. See for example Voltolini 2022, 57 ff., and Orilia 2024. It has nonetheless exerted a huge influence on all subsequent analytic philosophy.
[281] The guidebook of actualism is still Quine's *On What There Is* (1948), defending the thesis that there is everything (today in Quine 1980, 1-19). A well-accomplished critique of actualism is Francesco Berto's *L'esistenza non è logica* (see Berto 2012).

It is not quite the case, however, that existentialists fail to see the contradiction, as Carnap seems to imply. Let us take the case of Leopardi. In reference to the notion of 'spirit', for example, he writes: '*spirito* è una parola senza idea, come tante altre' (*Zib*. 4111. 11 luglio 1824; italics in the original). We have already seen above what this passage intends to convey: the word 'spirito' is just a word – it does not denote any real object. The same applies to immaterial entities, including God: 'e quello che dico dell'animo dico degli altri enti immateriali, compreso il Supremo' (ibid.). Leopardi employs Carnap's very distinction between grammatical and semantic meaninglessness: 'tanto è dire spirituale, quanto immateriale; questa, voce affatto negativa grammaticalmente, quella ideologicamente' (ibid.). Leopardi is fully aware of the logico-linguistic approach to philosophical questions, and he actively employs it – this should surprise analytic philosophers. He applies this kind of analysis to the notion of space and time with the very language of analytic philosophy:

> quelle innumerabili e immense questioni agitate dalla metafisica in qua, dai primi metafisici d'ogni secolo, circa il tempo e lo spazio, non sono che logomachie, nate da malintesi, e da poca chiarezza d'idee e poca facoltà di analizzare il nostro intelletto (*Zib*. 4233. 14 dicembre 1824).

It would be impossible to say something closer to Carnap's position. The same analysis is applied to nothingness itself: 'spirito' is 'una parola senza idea possibile; o vogliam dire un'idea meramente negativa e privativa, e però non idea; *come non è idea il niente*, o un corpo che non sia largo nè profondo nè lungo, e simili immaginazioni della lingua piuttosto che del pensiero' (*Zib*. 4253. 9 marzo 1827; italics mine). 'Spirit', 'time', 'space', 'God', and 'nothingness' are unveiled as pseudo-notions having no referent in the real world. Leopardi thus proves to be perfectly aware of the logical difficulty of thinking and writing meaningfully about nothingness and similar problematic concepts. The meaningfulness of Leopardi's and the existentialists' texts is meant to lie outside of logic, in the territory of the 'senso dell'animo'. Whether such an operation is legitimate

is up for debate, but such is their intention. It is only with the 'senso dell'animo', they argue, that one can capture the kind of meaningfulness that really matters. On the plane of logic, of course, these notions are problematic: yet these are the notions that can save your life, and that can help you to live authentically. Scientific truths change with time; as for the tautologies of logic, how can they help with pressing, existential matters? When Leopardi says 'all is nothing', he does not mean to say that nothing exists; he means 'nothing has meaning', 'nothing can satisfy our desire for the infinite'. Logic can well say that he is not saying anything, but his heart knows what he is saying, and our heart understands when we read his words.

The following is Carnap's method to establish the meaningfulness, or lack thereof, of a word. Let *a* be our word and 'S(*a*)' the sentence in which our word occurs (*a* is S). Carnap lists four prerequisites for the word *a* to be meaningful:

1. The *empirical criteria* for *a* are known.

2. It has been stipulated from what protocol sentences 'S(*a*)' is *deducible*. (Protocol sentences are elementary sentences accepted by everyone – the axioms of a formal system. For example, A=A).

3. The *truth-conditions* for 'S(*a*)' are fixed (i.e., the conditions under which we accept to call 'S(*a*)' true).

4. The method of *verification* of 'S(*a*)' is known. (Carnap 1959, 64-65; italics in the original).

It is all too easy to show that this method does not work for the most important words of our everyday life. For example, if we have *a* instantiated by the word 'love', we realise that either 'love' has no meaning, or Carnap's method utterly fails to define it. Are the

empirical conditions of love known? Is there a method of *empirical verification* to establish whether or not a given phenomenon is love? Has it been stipulated from what protocol sentences the proposition 'phenomenon x is love' can be deduced? Such questions make us smile.

The problem with logic, existentialists argue, is that it replaces the single individual with a general x, approximating the individual to the universal, and thus disregarding all the differences that make me the person I am and not someone else. In a study on the ethics of Kant and Sartre, Sorin Baiasu highlights this very problem, arguing that Kant's ethics fails to account for individuality: its 'ethical imperatives are transformed into precepts addressed to the same abstract persons' (Baiasu 2011, 121). Sartre even argues that when an ethical demand is addressed to the abstract universal (the x) it loses any meaning whatsoever (1992, 7). Carnap himself recognises the difficulty of translating the 'I' into logic (Carnap 1959, 74). Indeed, in formal logic we are forced to translate the 'I' with the x, saying for example that 'there is at least one x such that etc.': (∃x). Logic, in other words, is structurally forced to reduce individuality to the number 1. The single individual becomes the sentence 'there is at least one element in the set "people"'. Problems also arise if we try to formalise questions in classical logic: for example, 'ed io che sono?' (*Canto notturno*, l. 89). Classical logic cannot formalise questions. One could reply that expressions like 'I am nothing' and 'all is nothing' are only poetic images that are logically meaningless. But for the existentialists they do have meaning. The problem then becomes how is such meaning to be rescued. Confronted with the logical denial to translate individuality, the existentialist replies that they do not care about the x, the general abstract person. They care about the individual, and if they have to abandon logic for poetry to express individuality, so be it. The nothingness of existence, our unique

individuality, our desire for the infinite, the absurd, cannot be expressed in formal logic. After all, how could logic express the illogicity of existence?

At the end of his article, Carnap mentions *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and praises Nietzsche for openly choosing the form of poetry, rather than the one of metaphysics (as did Heidegger). This raises the question of whether the works of the existentialists are to be considered poetry or philosophy. This question is replied to in the next section, but this is how one of the greatest Nietzsche scholars approaches the problem:

> Questo libro [*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*] sembra sorgere […] dalla sfera delle espressioni primitive, ed è arduo classificarlo come opera filosofica. Una filosofia è di regola una manipolazione di concetti, i quali esprimono oggetti sensibili, mentre qui immagini e concetti non esprimono nè concetti nè cose concrete, sono simboli di qualcosa che non ha volto, sono espressioni nascenti (Colli 1980, 111).

Perhaps surprisingly, Colli and Carnap are in perfect agreement on the assessment of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. 'Si è spesso tentato con grande serietà', Colli goes on, 'di tenere *Così parlò Zarathustra* sotto la lente di una sobria considerazione scientifica, ma tale procedimento è qui assurdo, improduttivo, è proprio quello che non si deve fare' (1980, 118). The method to understand Nietzsche recommended by Colli and Carnap echoes a famous reflection of the *Zibaldone*: 'il filosofo esatto, paziente, geometrico, si affatica indarno tutta la vita a forza di analisi e di sintesi' to understand truths that can only be understood through the 'senso dell'animo' (see *Zib*. 1856). This applies for example to Nietzsche's notion of 'overman', which is not a doctrine, writes Colli, but a myth:

> Se si vuole esprimere in termini concettuali il superuomo, si stringe poco tra le dita, qualcosa di inconsistente, anzi qualcosa che suona ridicolo. Quando ci troviamo di fronte a un mito di Platone, noi moderni lo interpretiamo come un'esemplificazione, una trasposizione allegorica, una superflua, ridondante invasione in una sfera pseudofilosofica. Invece il mito è la comunicazione diretta del pensatore, di fronte alla quale tutto il resto diventa una tortuosa divagazione (Colli 1980, 121).

If Plato wrote poetically as well, perhaps there is after all a poetic component to philosophical writing that must be acknowledged. Or are we forced to conclude that Plato spoke with no meaning, just because he spoke poetically? *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, is also

a collection of myths, and so may be defined the *Operette morali*, as recently highlighted (see Abbrugiati 2020). What Colli claims can be seen clearly in Nietzsche's text. In the third part of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, for example, the 'bird of wisdom' exclaims: 'there is no up, no down! Throw yourself around, out, back you light one! Sing! Speak no more!' (Nietzsche 2006, III, *The Seven Seals*).[282] The bird of wisdom proclaims a new kind of wisdom: 'sing! Speak no more!' means 'abandon the rational discourse and start poetising!'. Poetry takes the place of philosophy understood as the science of logic (see Hegel). The result is a new science, a gay science, sang by the 'senso dell'animo' rather than rationally spoken by the intellect. The pioneer of this new science is Leopardi.

This same point about poetry was also made by Roland Barthes in *Is there any Poetic Writing?* (in Barthes 1968, 41 ff.). Barthes holds that ancient poetry was just adorned prose, while modern poetry (from Rimbaud onwards for Barthes) is something substantially different from prose: modern poetry can prescind from signs. This means that a poetic word does not necessarily have to refer to an object in a precise and straightforward manner. Seen from this perspective, the language of existentialism is poetic in essence. Alberto Folin applies Barthes's perspective to Leopardi, claiming that for Leopardi the meaning of existence cannot be grasped through theoretical language, but rather through 'la lingua dell'"immaginazione" che non è propriamente linguaggio, per riprendere un bellissimo testo di Roland Barthes (*Esiste una scrittura poetica?*), in quanto non ha natura del tutto segnica' (Folin in Capitano 2016, 11). Poetry is not, rigorously speaking, language: poetry is more of a 'lingua affine al grido', writes Folin

[282] 'Siehe, es giebt kein Oben, kein Unten! Wirf dich umher, hinaus, zurück, du Leichter! Singe! sprich nicht mehr!' (Nietzsche 2021, vol. IV, *Also sprach Zarathustra* I-IV, 291).

(ibid.), as testified by the question of the shepherd, which we could not formalise into logic.[283]

[283] See more on this contrast between existentialism and analytic philosophy in Renaudie 2023, 273-89.

5. From logic to poetry: a new kind of philosophy

Existentialism abandons formal logic for poetry, thereby forging a new kind of philosophy. This process is pioneered by Leopardi.

Those who examine nature solely through reason never truly understand it. They can analyse it, decompose it into its constituent parts, but they will never fully and deeply understand it:

> il tutto di essa, […] l'intenzion vera e profonda della natura, […] la cagion finale del suo essere e del suo esser tale, […] è impossibile il ritrovarle e l'intenderle a chiunque colla sola ragione analizza ed esamina la natura (*Zib*. 3237-39. 22 agosto 1823).

The notion of 'cagion finale' is probably used in the wake of Leibniz, yet once again landing to a conclusion diametrically opposed to Leibniz's. Leopardi is here in fact much closer to Pascal, who speaks of truths of the heart and truths of reason (Pascal 2008, 35-36). Existence does not coincide with what can be rationally understood about it, Leopardi argues. There is an irrational dimension to existence that is irreducible to reason, which he describes in distinctly anti-Platonic terms. Pure beauty, arising from perfect harmony, he writes, does not inspire great passions. Such an ideal beauty is like reason, in that it requires no warmth or emotion to sustain itself:

> al contrario un volto o una persona difettosa ma viva, graziosa ec. o fornita di un animo capriccioso, sensibile ec. sorprende, riscalda, affetta e tocca il capriccio di chi la riguarda, senza regola, senza esattezza, senza ragione ec. ec. e così le grandi passioni nascono per lo più dal capriccio, dallo straordinario ec. e non si ponno giustificare colla ragione (*Zib*. 269. 10 ottobre 1820).

This observation has profound philosophical consequences: some events, such as great passions, cannot be justified rationally. The passage from logic to poetry is what takes place in the metaphors of nothingness seen in Chapter 1. 'La conoscenza veicolata dai testi leopardiani – intesa come conoscenza filosofica – è di tipo metaforico', writes Antonella Del Gatto, meaning that Leopardi seeks to 'trovare rapporti tra i più diversi

aspetti del reale, […] far interagire oggetti tra loro incompatibili, e in tal modo sostituire la tradizionale logica razionale e sistematica con una conoscenza alogica' (2012, VII).

Examining nature with pure, cold reason alone is what German and English philosophers (like Leibniz, and Locke!) did in the 17th century (*Zib*. 1835). These thinkers, Leopardi argues, recognise only what is rational about existence, and therefore not much: 'non conoscendo altra esistenza nella natura che il ragionevole, il calcolato ec. […] errano a ogni tratto' (ibid.). According to the Italian existentialist Ernesto Grassi, this rationalist process was initiated by Descartes: 'at the very beginning of modern philosophy, Descartes consciously excluded […] humanistic education from philosophy conceived as pure search for truth' (Grassi 1969, 39). Leopardi himself references Thomas' *Éloge de Descartes* when writing about the developing of rationalism.[284]

In this regard, Luporini made a claim that had great success in Leopardi scholarship: the kind of reason that Leopardi condemns is 'la *raison*, la ragione dei "philosophes" del '700, la ragione come facoltà […] facoltà di analisi, calcolo e riflessione' (Luporini 1996, 48). Luporini thus falls into the uncomfortable position of having to justify the existence of two kinds of reasons. Leopardi's view is probably simpler: he condemns reason per se, when its use becomes excessive. Reason is one, which can be more or less used. The more we think about life, the unhappier we become. Conversely, the more we live, rather than think, the more we escape unhappiness. Leopardi writes:

> Io dunque non condanno la ragione in quanto è qualità naturale ed essenziale nel vivente, ma in quanto (per sola forza d'indebite e non naturali assuefazioni) cresce e si modifica in modo che diviene il principale ostacolo alla nostra felicità (*Zib*. 1825. 1° ottobre 1821).

He advocates minimising the use of reason. Yet, again, he does not say 'I condemn this kind of reason and not this other kind': he condemns an excessive use of it. Because 'la

[284] At the end of *Zib*. 3978, Leopardi points the reader to Thomas, *Éloge de Descartes*, *Oeuvres*, Amsterdam 1774, tome 4, pp. 47-48. This work by Thomas was one of the main channels through which Leopardi absorbed Descartes' thought.

natura in quanto natura è tutta quanta essenzialmente poetica' (*Zib*. 1842. 4 ottobre 1821), imagination and the heart, rather than reason, are the proper tools to engage with nature: 'queste facoltà nostre sono esse sole in armonia col poetico ch'è nella natura; la ragione non lo è' (*Zib*. 3242-43. 22 agosto 1823).

An important corollary of this conclusion is the rejection of the phenomenon/noumenon dualism central to Western philosophy from Plato to Kant. Nothing lies behind nature whose discovery would allow to understand nature.[285] This is what 'existence precedes essence' also means: all there is, is nature, i.e., being; our rational constructions come afterwards. The world is a world of phenomena; noumena come after, through us, and are usually misconceptions. This point is acutely detected by Jérôme: 'l'idée d'un monde de phénomènes et d'apparences, d'un voile derrière lequel se tiendrait le réel en soi est tout à fait étrangère à la pensée de Leopardi' (2021, 186). The rejection of the phenomenon/noumenon dualism is also one of the strongholds of Sartre's philosophy, defended in the Introduction to *Being and Nothingness*. That our rational constructions of reality are not only posterior to reality, but probably harmful to us, and that a suspension of all our pre-judgments is needed to really understand reality, is the fundamental idea of phenomenology, the basis of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. 'Il poeta lirico nell'ispirazione,' Leopardi goes on, 'il filosofo nella sublimità della speculazione, l'uomo d'immaginativa e di sentimento nel tempo del suo entusiasmo, […] vede e guarda le cose come da un luogo alto e superiore' (*Zib*. 3269. 26 agosto 1823). Passion and imagination, far from being obstacles to the knowledge of existence, as Plato thought, are the surest path towards it.[286]

[285] See for instance: 'la natura ci sta tutta dispiegata davanti, nuda ed aperta punto per ben conoscerla non è bisogno alzare alcun velo che la cuopra: è bisogno rimuovere gl'impedimenti e le alterazioni che sono nei nostri occhi e nel nostro intelletto; e queste, fabbricateci e cagionateci da noi col nostro raziocinio' (*Zib*. 2710. 21 maggio 1823).
[286] See Plato's *Laws* in Plato 2016, 817 c.

Now, what are these 'verità generali, […] grandi e importanti'? Ultimately, that 'tutto è nulla'. Existence is indeed poetic, but the poetry it is made of is a tragic one. And yet, in the meantime, in the flux of life, there is beauty, and Leopardi's poetic existentialism makes sure it does not lose sight of that. Among the 'verità generali, grandi e importanti', we must also include the truth of the *Plotinus*: there is some beauty in life to be enjoyed – let us enjoy it! There is some meaning – let us not miss out on it, just because everything is *ultimately* meaningless.

The epistemological power of imagination and poetry, however, does not completely erase the one of reason. *Both* reason and the heart understand existence in their own ways: the 'arido vero' is known with reason *and* felt by the heart. Because of the 'arido vero', reason and the heart are unable to make us happy: reason is, because it unveils the tragic truth of the nothingness of everything; the heart is, because it is in touch with the beauty of existence, which is ultimately an illusion, because it is not infinite. Truth and beauty are both required for our happiness, but what the human condition provides is either an ugly truth or a false beauty. That is why existence is a piece of tragic poetry. And yet, Leopardi's attempt is to challenge the human condition and create a philosophical system with the imagination and the heart, i.e., to create a beautiful truth. He tries to do philosophy with the heart and imagination, because

> essi soli sono atti a concepire, creare, formare, perfezionare un sistema filosofico, metafisico, politico che abbia il meno possibile di falso, o, se non altro, il più possibile di simile al vero, e il meno possibile di assurdo, d'improbabile, di stravagante (*Zib*. 3243. 22 agosto 1823).

A philosophy of the heart and of the imagination – this is the new kind of philosophy of existentialism, indistinguishable from poetry. This new philosophy Paola Cori defines, almost oxymoronically, as 'the vital logic that nourishes the *Zibaldone*' (Cori 2019, 8). The phrase 'vital logic' captures the essence of Leopardi's philosophical programme: that of the 'ultrafilosofia' – a perfect union of logic and the heart. This conclusion, after all, is

only the explicit existentialist version of the labels of 'pensiero poetante' and 'poesia pensante' that Antonio Prete assigned to Leopardi ([1980] 2006) under the inspiration of Heidegger. As Prete writes, for Leopardi 'non è la filosofia come campo di sapere ad essere "incomparabile" con la letteratura e la poesia, ma è solo "l'odierna filosofia che riduce la metafisica, la morale ec. a forma e condizione quasi matematica"' (2006, 77).

In the previous section, I posed the question of whether the enterprise of existentialism is philosophy or poetry. The best answer is that, when philosophy is understood in the way existentialists understand it, the question ceases to be relevant: poetry and philosophy are indistinguishable. When they philosophise, existentialists use words that would be meaningless in formal logic, but they have meaning insofar as they express something true for the individual, with which the reader can empathise by feeling rather than thinking, and to which the reader relates by means of their personal experiences and memories rather than logical symbols. When they poetise, existentialists seek to give the reader existential directions, or at least to express a dimension that resonates with the reader – and insofar as they do that, they philosophise. Carnap holds that metaphysics confuses logic and art mastering neither, and achieving nothing in either domain. I would instead reply that metaphysics has always sought to account for objects that elude logical analysis – which are in fact almost all the objects of real life – and to do so without sacrificing meaningfulness. It is often the case that metaphysical propositions say little from a strictly logical point of view, but they do speak to the 'senso dell'animo', and they do so with a degree of clarity that any human being can 'understand'.[287]

Metaphysics has not yet been able to provide a satisfying explanation of existence, but neither have science or logic. Metaphysics goes beyond poetry insofar as it tries to provide

[287] Nietzsche asks himself in many works whether philosophy is a science or an art. I think he would agree with the answer outlined here.

universal answers. Existentialism tries to give answers to the reader, a task which is not necessarily the primary goal of poetry. Such answers are not well-formed logical propositions – they are images, metaphors, experiences of the author, but generalised with the aim of being useful to the reader. The idiosyncratic experience of the existentialist can be told in a way that it relates to the reader intimately and powerfully, so that it fosters philosophical reflections and entice the reader to come up with her or his own answers. Think of the question of the *Canto notturno* 'ed io che sono?'. That is certainly Leopardi's own question, but can we help not asking ourselves that question while we read? Will it not become our own question? And will not invite us to come up with our own answer? Existentialism deals with notions that are inevitably hard to formalise into logic: how do you treat anxiety logically? How do you express boredom towards existence in logical terms? Yet tools taken from poetry, like metaphors, can sometimes tell us much more about our existence than all the logic in the world. Leopardi shares this project with the existentialists: using imagination and the heart to construct meaning within an otherwise meaningless existence. The currency of Leopardi's new philosophy is illusions.

6. Illusions: a new kind of knowledge

Illusions, for Leopardi, are not mere errors to be dispelled; they constitute a new kind of knowledge – the most essential one for living, and for living happily.

The phrase 'strage delle illusioni' has enjoyed wide consensus in Leopardi Studies.[288] It refers to a moment in Leopardi's life when he allegedly realises the vanity of all illusions. Yet, the temptation to regard this moment as definitive should be avoided, assuming it even occurred in the first place. In all of Leopardi's works, the phrase appears only once, in the *Discorso sopra lo stato presente dei costumi degl'Italiani* (1824), and is applied to the history of humanity rather than to Leopardi's own life:

> la gloria è un'illusione troppo splendida e un nome troppo alto perché possa durare dopo la strage delle illusioni, e la conoscenza della verità e realtà delle cose, e del loro peso e valore. L'amore della gloria è incompatibile colla natura de' tempi presenti (Leopardi 2014, 52).[289]

The 'strage delle illusioni' is a feature of the 'tempi presenti'. If this notion is to be applied to Leopardi's life at all, we might think of 1819, as the year of the so called 'conversione filosofica'. The important caveat about the use of the category 'strage delle illusioni', however, is that illusions come constantly back to life in Leopardi: 'perdute una volta, nè si perdono in modo che non ne resti una radice vigorosissima, e continuando a vivere, tornano a rifiorire in dispetto di tutta l'esperienza, e certezza acquistata' (*Zib*. 213-14. 18-20 agosto 1820). Illusions are better understood as being perpetually destroyed by reason and re-established, just as many times, by the heart and imagination – System 2 shuts them down, and System 1 recreates them. As Tilgher writes, 'appunto perché non è capace

[288] *La strage delle illusioni* is the title of a successful anthology of Leopardi's texts edited by Mario Andrea Rigoni (see Leopardi 1992).
[289] The same applies to *Zib*. 163 and 170, where the word 'strage' is used in a loose reference to antiquity and its illusions.

di generare le illusioni, la ragione non è capace di distruggerle veramente e a fondo' (1940, 20).

For Leopardi, the most powerful illusion is love. The greatest representation of love surviving the truth, and thus of illusion surviving reason, is the *Storia del genere umano* (1824). In the text, love is the only illusion Zeus allows on Earth (*Storia del genere umano*, 93). He establishes that only rarely will the truth be able to defeat love, 'sicchè la vita degli uomini, parimente occupata nel culto di quel fantasma [*sc*. amore] e di questo genio [*sc*. verità], sarà divisa in due parti; e l'uno e l'altro di quelli avranno nelle cose e negli animi dei mortali comune imperio' (ibid.). Two powers govern the human psyche: truth and love, reason and illusions, logic and poetry, System 2 and System 1. Now, in the sense that illusions partly govern the human psyche, they are real:

> Io considero le illusioni come cosa in certo modo reale stante ch'elle sono ingredienti essenziali del sistema della natura umana, e date dalla natura a tutti quanti gli uomini, in maniera che non è lecito spregiarle come sogno di un solo, ma propri veramente dell'uomo e voluti dalla natura, e senza cui la vita nostra sarebbe la più misera e barbara cosa ec. (*Zib*. 51).

Illusions are real not in a logical sense, since from the point of view of logic they are errors – they are nothing. They are real from the perspective of our first, positive nature. They are real because they provide a foundation for life.[290]

It is possible that Leopardi borrows the term 'illusion' from philosophical language, particularly from Descartes. In one version of the famous cogito argument, Descartes uses the term illusions to refer to dreams, thus in the sense of 'falsehoods' (*Discourse on the method* in Descartes 1984, vol. I, 127). Leopardi also frequently uses the word 'dreams' in the *Zibaldone* to denote philosophical falsehoods, for example, in reference to the doctrines of Plato and Leibniz (see *Zib*. 154, 1622, 1857 and passim). Even if Leopardi

[290] See also Giacomo's letter to Pietro Giordani, 30th June 1820: 'Io non tengo le illusioni per mere vanità, ma per cose in certo modo sostanziali, giacchè non sono capricci particolari di questo o di quello, ma naturali e ingenite essenzialmente in ciascheduno; e compongono tutta la nostra vita' (in Leopardi 1998a).

did borrow the term ‘illusion’ from Descartes, he nonetheless redefines it, giving it a positive connotation. Illusions are not just comforting stories we tell ourselves to avoid succumbing to analytical reason – they are the counterpart to analytical reason. The very term ‘illusion’ makes sense only from the point of view of reason: it is reason, that is, that calls them ‘illusions’. Yet if we adopt the point of view of the heart, they could otherwise be called feelings, joys, or heartbeats. What Leopardi calls ‘illusions’ existentialists call ‘values’: they are both personal, subjective, independent from reason, and they are all we can rely on to create some meaning in our existence. Thus, there is rational knowledge, which operates through empirical observations and speaks the language of logic, and there is the knowledge of the heart and imagination, which operates through illusions and speaks poetically. This is the essence of Leopardi’s ‘ultrafilosofia’ (*Zib*. 115. 7 giugno 1820): a new kind of philosophy attempting a perfect union between reason and the irrational, brain and heart, logic and poetry, philosophy and literature. Remo Bodei writes beautifully that: ‘l’“ultrafilosofia” non è altro che la prosecuzione della filosofia con altri mezzi, con quelli cioè della poesia’ (2022, 5). A new state of the spirit where reason and illusions coexist, and so do truth and beauty.

Those who are attached to science and logic the most will tend to think that there is no value outside of reason, as Camus seems to hold in the *Myth of Sisyphus*. Yet the case can be made that both science and philosophy show that such view is wrong. One might also claim that Leopardi and Nietzsche believe in illusions because they have nothing else to believe in. This is indeed true, but who has anything? This is how Leopardi and Nietzsche would reply. The scientist or the logician would probably endorse the value of the scientific discovery, of the ‘proved’ truth. But what is a ‘proved’ truth? The truth-value of a scientific discovery is always in question, and in fact science usually advances by proving earlier ‘discoveries’ false – not much of a different process from philosophy’s,

after all. If we look at the history of science, this conclusion is patent. Empedocles fashioned a sort of pioneering philosophy of nature, and then the atomists contradicted him; Aristotle contradicted the atomists; Galileo and Newton proved Aristotle wrong; Einstein proved Newton wrong. We are still chronologically close to Einstein, yet – who knows? – his General Relativity might be proved wrong in the future. If we consider how scientific events have developed so far, it would not seem unreasonable to derive such a model. The real value of a scientific discovery is in fact an existential one for the scientist that makes it. Yet, *sub specie aeternitatis*, so to speak, the scientific discovery is an illusion, since it has (or will likely be) proved false. Universal gravity was Newton's illusion – it gave him existential meaning, it probably made him feel that his life was worth being lived. The Infinite was Leopardi's and gave him existential meaning. In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), Thomas Kuhn lists the most common reasons why someone might be attracted to science: 'the *desire* to be useful, the *excitement* of exploring new territory, the *hope* of finding order, and the *drive* to test established knowledge' (Kuhn 2012, 33; italics mine). All these are passions of the single individual, as the italicised terms underscore. Science matters personally to the individual that undertakes it; it is a means to fulfil a personal, sometimes intimate, need. Many scientists will never acknowledge this, perhaps blinded by the phantom of 'objectivity', but science is, firstly and ultimately, a subjective endeavour. It begins with a person's feelings and it provides the greatest satisfaction when it fulfils a person's hopes.

Kuhn reports that Wolfgang Pauli, 'in the months before Heisenberg's paper on matrix mechanics pointed the way to a new quantum theory, wrote to a friend: "at the moment physics is again terribly confused. In any case, it is too difficult for me, and I wish I had been a movie comedian or something of the sort and had never heard of physics."' (Kuhn 2012, 49). Kuhn notes that this 'testimony is particularly impressive if

contrasted with Pauli's words less than five months later: "Heisenberg's type of mechanics has again given me hope and joy in life. To be sure it does not supply the solution to the riddle, but I believe it is again possible to march forward."' (ibid.). If it is true that the scientific discovery holds a human and existential value prior to, and in some respects even superior to, a strictly scientific one, it should not come as a surprise that it is 'particularly in periods of acknowledged crisis that scientists have turned to philosophical analysis as a device for unlocking the riddles of their field' (Kuhn 2012, 50).

There are feelings in science; there is freedom – the freedom to pursue this experiment and not that, for example; there is ignorance. The same ignorance that pertains to philosophy and probably represents the final destination of any form of knowledge that is sufficiently developed and sufficiently honest. Science and philosophy are sisters on the same raft of ignorance of what existence is really about.

7. Subjective truth, or creating the meaning of existence

Leopardi and the existentialists shape the new notion of subjective truth: by creating our own subjective truths we can create meaning in our existence.

In *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), Nietzsche warns against being 'puritanical fanatics of conscience who would rather die clinging to a certain nothing than embrace an uncertain something' (Nietzsche 2002, § 10).[291] We should not resign ourselves, he argues, to the nothingness revealed by reason, but rather combat nihilism by creating new values and finding something that is not vanity. All the existentialists have this tension in common. This creation is accomplished with the heart and the imagination.

Tommaso Grandi has recently compared Leopardi's theory of imagination with Sartre's, claiming that what Leopardi calls 'vedere attraverso i sensi' and 'vedere attraverso l'immaginazione' (*Zib*. passim) correspond to Sartre's 'conscience perceptive' and 'coscience imagée' (Grandi 2024). Leopardi's 'vedere attraverso i sensi' and Sartre's 'conscience perceptive' perceive real objects; Leopardi's 'vedere attraverso l'immaginazione' and Sartre's 'coscience imagée' feign unreal objects. Perceiving real objects is what the patient, precise, and analytic philosopher does; feigning unreal objects is what the poet does, discovering the deepest relationships between things. To better make sense of this distinction, here is Leopardi's example:

> il mondo e gli oggetti sono in un certo modo doppi. Egli vedrà cogli occhi una torre, una campagna; e nel tempo stesso coll'immaginazione vedrà un'altra torre, un'altra campagna, un altro suono. In questo secondo genere di obbietti sta tutto il bello e il piacevole delle cose (*Zib*. 4418. 30 novembre 1828).

[291] 'puritanische Fanatiker des Gewissens geben, welche lieber noch sich auf ein sicheres Nichts als auf ein ungewisses Etwas sterben legen' (Nietzsche 2021, vol. V, § 10).

The fundamental opposition I outlined above applies here as well: on one pole, we find reason, logic, empirical perception, truth, and the unveiling of the human condition as tragic; on the other pole, we find imagination, the heart, poetry, illusions, and all the beauty the human condition can provide. This opposition is later endorsed by Nietzsche and, subsequently, by the existentialists.

For Leopardi the term 'poetic' essentially means 'vague' – which is also philosophically coherent. 'Vague' means that whose limits cannot be clearly perceived, opening up the realm of the possible. In *The Imaginary* (1940), Sartre defines imagination precisely as the faculty of relating to the possible (Sartre 2004). In commenting on Sartre's text, Jonathan Webber writes: 'in imagination the relations between objects are stipulated, where in perception they are discovered' (Webber in Sartre 2004, xxii). In *L'infinito*, imagination is what 'feigns' the 'interminati spazi', the 'infinito silenzio', and the 'eterno' – none of which can be perceived clearly because they do not exist. Leopardi is aware that what we empirically know about the world constantly changes. His new kind of philosophy leverages the relativity of knowledge to create a new kind of imaginative, non-empirical knowledge. His philosophy, rather than discovering empirical truths about things, creates new, imaginary, and beautiful relations between them. As Toni Negri writes, 'in Leopardi, immaginazione non è una funzione conoscitiva […]: è piuttosto una funzione costitutiva. Di infiniti mondi, di indefiniti spazi e tempi – da vivere, da percorrere' (Negri 1987, 118-19). For Sartre, the work of art as an imaginary creation is the hallmark of being human, because it is 'only possible if consciousness is not placed "in-the-midst-of-the-world" as one existent among others' (Reynolds and Renaudie 2024). All existents except humans are what they are and nothing else – there are no possibilities to be imagined. Humans are all possibilities and can always be different than they are.

The new poetic philosophy of Leopardi and the existentialists aims to provide a universal method to achieve a new kind of truth and virtue: Leopardi's poetry aspires to be a new logic, and a new ethics, subjective rather than objective. What is true for me need not be true for everyone else, as long as it makes my existence happier and worth living. This is what Leopardi means when he writes: 'quante grandi illusioni concepite in un momento o di entusiasmo, o di disperazione o insomma di esaltamento, sono in effetto le più reali e sublimi verità' (*Zib*. 1855-56. 5-6 ottobre 1821). Illusions 'rivelano all'uomo come per un lampo improvviso, i misteri più nascosti, gli abissi più cupi della natura, i rapporti più lontani o segreti […], dietro alle quali cose il filosofo esatto, paziente, geometrico, si affatica indarno tutta la vita e a forza di analisi e di sintesi' (ibid.). 'Chi non sa quali altissime verità sia capace di scoprire e manifestare il vero poeta lirico?' (ibid.). In the wake of Pascal's notion of 'heart-truths' (2008, 35-36), Leopardi starts to shape a new conception of truth – the subjective truth.[292] The beauty of the subjective truth is that everyone can achieve their own on their own terms. Leopardi is re-admitting poetry into philosophy – the very poetry that Plato had expelled. As Franco D'Intino highlights, Leopardi appreciates poetry 'with exactly the same arguments that Plato uses to condemn [it]' (2015, 26), i.e., the fact that poetry exalts the irrational within us.

Illusions can be universal or individual. With modernity, Leopardi claims, universal illusions have nearly vanished, and the only universal thing left is reason. But individual illusions endure, because our first nature endures. We could even say that, strictly speaking, illusions are inherently individual. Love, for instance, is always the particular love I feel for a particular person. If we abstract from the particular people we love, love becomes an empty concept. A mathematical truth, by contrast, stands independently of

[292] Pascal is only a starting point however. His heart-truths and Leopardi's illusions are quite different. I make this point clear in my article *Leopardi's response to Wittgenstein*, which has been accepted for publication in the *Rivista Internazionale di Studi Leopardiani*.

who is thinking it at any given time. Thus, by adding the subjectivity of my illusion to its truth, we form the notion of subjective truth. For a meaningful existence, we need to find a person that *we* love, or an enterprise that holds value *for us*. A hundred certain mathematical truths have no power to make me happy, but a single illusion that I cherish, and that maybe is even wrong for others, can give me a reason to live and make me happy. This is the core idea of this chapter, which can be shown to go from Leopardi, through Nietzsche, to Camus. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus writes: '"Art and nothing but art," said Nietzsche; "we have art in order not to die of the truth"' (1975, 92).[293] The quotation is taken from Nietzsche's *Will to Power*: 'Truth is ugly: *we have art* lest we perish from the truth' (Nietzsche 2017b, § 822; italics in the original).[294] This is little less than the *mise en abyme* of Leopardi's whole thought itself, yet it is to some extent possible to pin the idea down to a few passages that Nietzsche read.[295] The ugliness of the truth emerges in the *Detti memorabili di Filippo Ottonieri*: 'certamente il vero non è bello' (397), and even more explicitly in the *Zibaldone*: 'tutto il vero è brutto' (*Zib*. 1522. 18 agosto 1821). The idea recurs in the *Dialogo di Timandro ed Eleandro*, linked to the necessity of illusions – the basis of art – as a foundation for life. Eleandro states that 's'ingannano grandemente quelli che dicono e predicano che la perfezione dell'uomo consiste nella conoscenza del vero, e tutti i suoi mali provengono dalle opinioni false e dalla ignoranza' (508). 'Quelle verità che sono la sostanza di tutta la filosofia', he goes on, 'si debbono occultare alla maggior parte degli uomini' (ibid.). Instead, 'lodo ed esalto quelle opinioni, benchè false, che generano atti e pensieri nobili, forti, magnanimi, virtuosi, ed utili al ben

[293] 'L'art et rien que l'art, dit Nietzsche, nous avons l'art pour ne point mourir de la vérité' (Camus 1981, 128).
[294] 'Die Wahrheit ist häßlich: wir haben die Kunst, damit wir nicht an der Wahrheit zugrunde gehn' (Nietzsche 2021, vol. XIII, 500).
[295] Nietzsche read the *Operette* both in German, in Heyse 1878 translation, and in the original, in the 1845 Ranieri edition (see Galimberti in Nietzsche 1992, 27).

comune o privato; quelle immaginazioni belle e felici, ancorchè vane, che danno pregio alla vita' (509). Nothing different, after all, than what preached in the *Dialogo di Plotino e di Porfirio*, where the famous 'error di calcolo' is what saves Porphyry from suicide. That error, 'ha luogo, si potrebbe dire, altrettante volte, quanti sono i momenti nei quali ciascheduno abbraccia la vita, ovvero acconsente a vivere e se ne contenta' (*Dialogo di Plotino e di Porfirio*, 563). Errors, illusions, the heart, the imagination are always tied to life and beauty in Leopardi; reason, logic, truth to death and ugliness. There is even a passage from the *Pensieri*, which Nietzsche also read,[296] that might have inspired him:

> essendo il vero sempre troppo povero e difettivo, è necessaria all'uomo in ciascuna cosa, per dilettarlo o per muoverlo, parte d'illusione e di prestigio, e promettere assai più e meglio che non si può dare. La natura medesima è impostora verso l'uomo, nè gli rende la vita amabile o sopportabile, se non per mezzo principalmente d'immaginazione e d'inganno (Leopardi 1982b, XXIX).

This is one more evidenced example of how a specific idea in Leopardi indirectly influenced an existentialist thorough Nietzsche. The material analysed in this project suggests that this phenomenon is much more extensive.

The creation of subjective truths is philosophically legitimate for two reasons. First, because all knowledge is relative: 'non v'è quasi altra verità assoluta se non che *Tutto è relativo*' (*Zib*. 452. 22 dicembre 1820; italics in the original).[297] If no knowledge is absolute, then I am epistemologically allowed to create my own knowledge. The same applies to ethics: if there is no absolute good and evil, I am ethically allowed to fashion my own concepts of good and evil. The second reason why subjective truths are philosophically legitimate is because we are free: the notion of subjective truth thus leads to the subsequent one of subjective virtue. Let us consider the following passage, one of

[296] A broad selection from the *Pensieri* is included in the second volume of Heyse's 1878 translation (see Heyse 1878, vol. II, 251 ff.).
[297] Leopardi reiterates the relativity of all human knowledge many times: see *Zib*. 945-50; 1089-95; 1922-3; 2527-8; 2705-09.

the most important passages of Leopardi's existentialism: 'bisogna proporre un fine alla propria vita per viver felice. O gloria letteraria, o fortune, o dignità, una carriera insomma' (*Zib*. 4518. 31 maggio 1829). 'Carriera' is here used in its etymological meaning of 'road', 'way', and therefore 'sense', 'direction'. He continues:

> Io non ho potuto mai concepire che cosa possano godere, come possano viver quegli scioperati e spensierati che (anche maturi o vecchi) passano di godimento in godimento, di trastullo in trastullo, senza aversi mai posto uno scopo a cui mirare abitualm., senza aver mai detto, fissato, tra se medesimi: a che mi servirà la mia vita? (ibid.).

These reflections demonstrate Leopardi's commitment to make his existentialism very practical, no less than Sartre's.[298] Leopardi puts great effort in perfecting a new atheist, existentialist ethics, concluding:

> Non ho saputo immaginare che vita sia quella che costoro menano, che morte quella che aspettano. Del resto, tali fini vaglion poco in se, ma molto vagliono i mezzi, le occupaz.[i], la speranza, l'immaginarseli come gran beni a forza di assuefazione, di pensare ad essi e di procurarli. *L'uomo può ed ha bisogno di fabbricarsi esso stesso de' beni in tal modo*. (*Zib*. 4518. 31 maggio 1829; italics mine).

'Tali fini vaglion poco in se' means that existence has no intrinsic meaning – those 'fini' have value insofar as they give a direction to our life. The conclusion is a perfect expression of atheistic existentialism: human beings can and must create valuable existential aims themselves for themselves. No one else – no God, no other person – can do it for them. This is the answer to the shepherd's question: 'ed io che sono?' The answer, paraphrased, is: 'you are a being who must create a meaning for himself, because you need one, but no one else can give it to you'.

Put in extreme brevity and in the form of a syllogism, Leopardi's existentialism reads as follows:

1. [First premise]: 'we want to be happy' (see the theory of pleasure);

2. [Second premise]: 'in order to be happy we need meaning' (*Zib*. 4518); but:

[298] The passage under analysis was conceived by Leopardi for his 'manuale di filosofia pratica' (see ibid.).

3. [Third premise]: ‘there is no intrinsic meaning in our existence nor is anyone going to give one to us’ (*Zib*. 273 and 4518); therefore,

4. [Conclusion]: ‘we must create our own meaning (*Zib*. 4518) and thus achieve happiness’.

The distinction between objective, logical truths and subjective, personal truths recurs constantly in the works of the existentialists.[299] Kevin Aho, a prominent contemporary scholar of existentialism, summarises the issue as follows:

> On this view, whether a belief is rational or objectively true is irrelevant. What matters is the intensity and passion of my commitments, because they alone belong to my existence. But, for Kierkegaard, this exposes the ‘paradoxical character’ of subjective truth […]; it is a truth grounded in anguish, because it is objectively uncertain and unintelligible to others (Aho 2020).

Karl Jaspers reads the story of Giordano Bruno through the notion of subjective truth, arguing that only through death could Bruno demonstrate his genuine beliefs in his theories, as there was no scientific confirmation of them: he had to *make* them true. Galileo, on the contrary, did not need to die to make his beliefs true, because he had already been able to prove them by means of scientific experiments. Thus, when pressured by the Church, he chose to retract to save his life (see Jaspers 1967, 51 ff.). Making his beliefs true in order to save his life is what Leopardi did, too. He advocates for suicide in the *Frammento sul suicidio* (1820) but then sets the pen aside and goes on living. He crafts a perfectly logical defence of suicide in the words of Porphyry, yet he prioritises life over logic, and let Plotinus win the debate. His reason pushes him towards suicide, but his heart feels there is some good in existence. Ultimately, he chose to embrace life, and so did the existentialists.

[299] For example, Kierkegaard speaks about it in his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Kierkegaard 2009), Nietzsche in *The Will to Power* (Nietzsche 2017b, § 457), and Unamuno in an article called *¿Qué es verdad?* (see Unamuno 2017, VII).

8. Leopardi *vs* Kierkegaard

Leopardi does not follow irrationalism to the point of reaching religion, as does Kierkegaard. The overall best definition of Leopardi's thought is 'existentialist'.

Many scholars have defended an irrationalist interpretation of Leopardi (see, among others, Rensi 1919, 115; Tilgher 1940, 46; Rigoni 1982, 63; Gioanola 1995, 360; 2005, 145). Many others have argued for a rationalist Leopardi (see, among others, Gentile 2015, 66; Binni 1971, 146; Luporini 1996, 112; Jérôme 2021, 143; Bodei 2022, 47). Some have taken a middle ground (Prete 2006, 97; D'Intino 2009b and 2022). I am inclined to regard Luporini's account as the most persuasive, since he acknowledges the vitalist/irrationalist component of Leopardi's thought, but ultimately concludes in favour of a rationalistic/nihilistic interpretation: 'Leopardi ha dissolto il proprio vitalismo nel nichilismo' (Luporini 1996, 73).[300] Let us clarify this point.

The ultimate prevailing of nihilism over irrationalism is not easily discernible in Leopardi's works, as he consistently strives to silence reason and give rise to new illusions. There is in fact a never-ending interplay between rationalism and irrationalism, the destruction of illusions and their renaissance, reason and nature, truth and beauty, philosophy and poetry, the *Operette* and the *Canti*, and so on. He writes: 'tutto è nulla al mondo, anche la mia disperazione' (*Zib*. 72), but he also writes: 'ma con tutto ciò come possiamo chiamar vile e nulla quell'opera di cui non vediamo nè potremo mai vedere nemmeno i limiti?' (*Zib*. 2937-38). We have the *Canto notturno* with its tragic last line 'è funesto a chi nasce il dì natale' (l. 143), but we also have *Il Risorgimento* with its fresh and joyful: 'che virtù nova è questa, / Questa che sento in me?' (ll. 83-84). We have the

[300] This is also Amelotti's conclusion (1937, 331).

Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese but we also have the *Dialogo di Plotino e di Porfirio*. If there is a constant in Leopardi's work, it seems to be this pendulum between reason and nature.[301] This interplay between the rational cognition of the tragic truth and the poetic effort to create meaning is probably how one can best define Leopardi's thought. Ultimately, however, illusions fail to provide real happiness, and Leopardi recognises this. His illusions behave like the values of the existentialists: they are subjective, created by us, but, because of that, they are also finite, and die with us.

I clearly concur with Luporini in calling Leopardi an existentialist (1996, 122). What is questionable in his position, however, is treating existentialism and materialism as mutually exclusive. He writes: 'il momento esistenzialistico si risolve e dissolve così in Leopardi, almeno dal punto di vista teoretico, in quello materialistico' (1996, 80). He juxtaposes existentialism with irrationalism and materialism with nihilism, but this need not be so: existentialism can be both nihilistic and materialistic. Sartre, Heidegger, Camus can very well be regarded as both existentialists and nihilists. The term 'existentialist' is broad enough to encompass irrationalism, materialism, and nihilism. In this sense, this term opens Leopardi's thought to multiple critical perspectives, rather than limiting it within any one label. There is rationalism in Leopardi, but he exalts illusions and criticises reason for destroying the beauty of existence. There certainly is nihilism, too, yet illusions are always reborn in his work, creating new, unforeseen meaning. The connotation of existentialist is general enough to include all these nuances of Leopardi's thought, while also specific enough to capture its essence: the precedence of existence over essence, the notion that nothingness is the principle of everything, the absence of a God determining

[301] Luporini too acknowledges the coexistence of vitalism and nihilism I am highlighting: 'si badi: del vitalismo rimarrà sempre traccia in lui. La sua antropologia non cambia, o non cambia troppo. L'uomo rimane sempre desiderio (e quindi sentimento, passione ecc.), come ogni altro animale, del resto' (1996, 112).

things a priori, boredom, anguish, etc. As Cornelio Fabro writes, 'l'Esistenzialismo non parteggia per l'irrazionalismo assoluto a scapito di ogni uso della ragione. Anche l'Esistenzialismo accetta, e sotto certi aspetti pone ancora al posto d'onore, il razionale' (Fabro 1943, ch. I). Leopardi, too, seems to ultimately embody this balance. Let us consider the following passage as an example:

> La ragione di cui l'uomo solo è provveduto […] come p. mille parti è utile, p. mille parti necessaria alla società, ed origine e cagione effettiva di essa, così per mille parti […] è di sua natura nocevole e anche direttam. contraria alla società degli uomini, e al loro ben essere e lor perfezione nello stato sociale ec. ec. (*Zib*. 3896. 21 novembre 1823).

Both the rational and the irrational are present in Leopardi. Reducing him to either pure rationalism or pure irrationalism would be inaccurate. The question might then become the following: where does Leopardi's irrationalism begin and where does it end? It begins with the affirmation of life against reason's suggestion to commit suicide, but it stops short of embracing religion as Kierkegaard does and granting illusions full reality. Leopardi is an irrationalist in the senses outlined above: he thinks that existence is fundamentally not comprehensible through reason, and that our non-rational faculties are essential to create meaning. Yet rationalism remains relevant as well, as reason is never truly abandoned as a tool for investigating existence. His major attempt to combine these two approaches is the 'ultrafilosofia' – the imaginative creation of philosophical systems. This approach is epitomised in the famous passage: 'non bisogna estinguer la passione colla ragione, ma convertir la ragione in passione' (*Zib*. 294. 22 ottobre 1820). Reason is not something to be disposed of, but rather transformed into passion, a process that seeks to harmonise rationalism and irrationalism.

One might question why irrationalism should lead to religion. That is in fact not necessarily the case, but it is the case for Leopardi, and especially for existentialism. Let us start with Leopardi. Religion is one of the greatest illusions for him, but most

importantly, religion is the transcendental condition for all illusions, meaning that religion is the only illusion that would grant full reality to all other illusions:

> Dopo la cognizione pertanto, non possiamo tornare alle illusioni, cioè ripersuadercene, se non conoscendo che son vere. Ma non son vere se non rispetto a Dio e ad un'altra vita, […] dove la speranza sarà realizzata, la virtù e l'eroismo premiato ec. dove insomma le illusioni non saranno più illusioni ma realtà (*Zib*. 410. 9-15 dicembre 1820).

This view is expressed early in the *Zibaldone*, but it will never change. Illusions are only made real by God, but we have said above that they are real *qua* illusions. Two meanings must be distinguished here: illusions *qua* illusions hold value insofar as they provide direction and meaning to our existence, regardless of their objective truth. Reason, however, is always vigilant, and the unveiling of illusions as delusions is always near at hand. Illusions are illusions and not full realities because they are not infinite. For illusions to hold both value *and* truth – and thus to be real – they require something else that makes them infinite. The only being capable of such a thing is God. Yet most scholars agree that religion is not real for Leopardi.[302] Illusions, then, hold only a temporary, contingent reality, like the values of the existentialists: temporary because they die with us, and contingent upon our freely assigned meanings. Following the path of irrationalism and the subjective truth of illusions, Leopardi could have well argued for the reality of religion, perhaps claiming that, just as we cannot fully understand existence, we cannot fully understand the eternal existence that religion promises us. This is roughly the line of argument Kierkegaard and religious existentialists adopted. In this regard, Massimo Donà correctly observes that 'il Cristianesimo cui fa appello Leopardi va inteso come Religione "necessaria" alla ragione. […] Ossia, come dimensione chiamata in causa dallo stesso rigore del puro ragionamento' (2013, 132). But religion remains at the stage of need for Leopardi, a regulative idea of reason in the Kantian sense – never a reality.

[302] For a full updated account of the issue see Veronese and Williams 2013.

Leopardi rejects Christianity, even at the cost of letting the whole castle of illusions collapse. This is why only Christian existentialists – Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Chestov, Unamuno, Marcel – can truly find a value worthy of their expectations, since God alone can provide the Infinite human beings desire.[303] This is acknowledged by Leopardi, Nietzsche, and atheist existentialists in general.[304] Atheist existentialists recognise the necessity of God but refuse to believe in Him.

Some readers may be thinking of the passage where Porphyry argues that eternal life is unappealing due to its inconceivability. Yet, as already discussed, that passage reveals a patent contradiction in Leopardi's philosophy (see Chapter 2, section 9). The prevailing argument in his work is that we need another life for this one to make sense and for illusions to hold reality. Besides, the inconceivability of eternal life is not a valid argument against its value (or its existence). The inconceivability of God and eternal life is acknowledged by all existentialists, including the religious ones. Unamuno, for instance, writes: 'not only does one not believe with reason nor above reason nor beneath reason – but one believes against reason' (1972, 216).[305] That faith is not against reason but only above it, was Kierkegaard's position (Jackson 1998, 246). The distinction between above and against reason was used apologetically by Pascal (see Pascal 2008). Leopardi was probably thinking about Pascal when he objects that 'la distinzione fra

[303] That the true object of desire in Leopardi is the true Infinite and not the indefinite is my thesis in Costa 2024.

[304] For Leopardi, see for example: 'l'esperienza conferma che l'uomo qual è ridotto, non può esser felice sodamente e durevolmente (quanto può esserlo quaggiù) se non in uno stato (ma veramente) religioso, cioè che dia un corpo e una verità alle illusioni, senza le quali non c'è felicità' (*Zib*. 411. 9-15 dicembre 1820). See also *Zib*. 216, 423 ff., 433. Donà treated this issue thoroughly (2013, passim). That the state of nihilism is caused by the death of God is clear in Nietzsche's writings. The main instance is *Gay Science*, § 125 (see also Stellino 2015, 227). What is not so clear is that outside of religion there is no truly viable alternative to find definitive and absolute meaning, but this position can be widely defended. Both points are quite clear in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, where Sartre declares that 'man is fundamentally the desire to be God' (2020, 735), but also that God does not exist – and the non-existence of God is the reason why the human being is a useless passion. Both points are also included in Heidegger's famous statement that 'only a God can save us' (Heidegger 1993, 107).

[305] 'Y no sólo no se cree con la razón ni aun sobre la razón o por debajo de ella, sino que se cree contra la razón' (Unamuno 1983, 282).

superiore e contrario alla ragione è frivola' (*Zib*. 1627. 4 settembre 1821). The mysteries of religion, Leopardi goes on, 'si oppongono dirittamente al nostro modo di concepire e ragionare' (ibid.). Yet, by virtue of the relativity of all knowledge, the inconceivability of religion does not prove its falsity: 'ciò però non prova che sieno falsi [*sc*. i misteri della religione], ma che il nostro detto modo [*sc*. di ragionare] non è vero se non relativamente, cioè dentro questo particolare ordine di cose' (ibid.). The first principle of Leopardi's system is always that 'tutto è relativo' (*Zib*. 452).

The crucial difference with Kierkegaard is that Leopardi does not seem to believe in religion. Let us consider this passage from Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*:

> Poetry is illusion before understanding, religiousness illusion after understanding. In between poetry and religiousness worldly wisdom performs its vaudeville. Every individual who does not live either poetically or religiously is stupid (2009, 383).

Kierkegaard refers to poetry and religion as illusions. Leopardi and Kierkegaard thus agree on the first part of the argument: poetry is the illusion that precedes reason. However, Leopardi does not follow Kierkegaard into the realm of religion, the illusion which comes after reason. Leopardi remains at the stage of the worldly wisdom, and in this sense he is still a rationalist/nihilist and not a complete irrationalist like Kierkegaard. As Negri puts it: 'l'unica possibilità di riconquistare la trascendenza è quella di assumere paradosso e disperazione come sostegno della fede – così in Kierkegaard ecc. Ma di questo secondo processo, davvero non c'è nulla in Leopardi' (1987, 346n179).

Irrationalism was the great opportunity for Leopardi to embrace religion and redeem existence from its meaninglessness; but he did not take it. Clearly, reason could not be overcome so easily by him. Kierkegaard's leap of faith would have probably struck Leopardi as philosophically dishonest. Religious existentialists are indeed charged with

philosophical dishonesty in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1975, 50). For example, in reference to the Russian religious existentialist Lev Chestov (1866-1938), Camus writes:

> When, at the conclusion of his passionate analyses, Chestov discovers the fundamental absurdity of all existence, he does not say: 'This is the absurd,' but rather: 'This is God: we must rely on him even if he does not correspond to any of our rational categories' (Camus 1975, 37).[306]

Chestov's conclusion is the one Kierkegaard adopts and Leopardi rejects. In *Devils* (1873), Dostoevsky has one of his characters famously declare that 'the absolute atheist stands on the next to last rung of the ladder of perfect faith (whether or not he takes the next step)' (2008, 457). The next-to-last rung of the ladder is the recognition of the absurdity of existence: the believer then takes a step the atheist is not prepared to take. On that rung, Dostoevsky says 'God must be there', while Leopardi says 'nothing is there'. Going from the next-to-last to the final rung is Kierkegaard's leap. The believer is called to make the *sacrificium intellectus*, a sacrifice that Leopardi, Camus, and atheist existentialists chose not to make. Kierkegaard's leap, therefore, is dishonest to Camus: 'being able to remain on that dizzying crest [i.e., Dostoevsky's next-to-last rung] – that is integrity [Fr. *honnêteté*] and the rest is subterfuge' (1975, 50).[307] Yet atheist existentialists are called to be honest in another respect, too, and recognise, against Camus and his happy Sisyphus, the unhappiness that philosophical honesty entails. This is alternative: either we acquiesce to dishonesty and believe irrationally in God to give existence full, infinite meaning; or we remain on the crest of honesty, and refuse to believe in religion – but we cannot call this state happy. Leopardi remains honest, but he also accepts the resulting unhappiness – something which Camus' Sisyphus betrays.

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[306] lorsqu'au terme de ses analyses passionnées, Chestov découvre l'absurdité fondamentale de toute existence, il ne dit point : ' Voici l'absurde ', mais ' voici Dieu – c'est à lui qu'il convient de s'en remettre, même s'il ne correspond à aucune de nos categories rationnelles' (Camus 1981, 53).

[307] 'Savoir se maintenir sur cette arête vertigineuse, voilà l'honnêteté, la reste est subterfuge' (Camus 1981, 72).

In conclusion, both the rational and the irrational are integral to Leopardi's work, and both labels of rationalism and irrationalism apply. He incessantly sought to harmonise them within his 'ultrafilosofia'. One might object that this synthesis of rational and irrational, philosophy and poetry, does not succeed, and perhaps they would be right. Yet this remains Leopardi's endeavour – contradictory perhaps, but so is reality, he would say. The term 'existentialism' encompasses all these dimensions of Leopardi's thought and is therefore probably the most fit category one can use to define it. Irrationalism is meant to prevail, but it does not, as it stops short of religion, the only source of real, infinite meaning. The most apt definition of Leopardi's thought is thus atheistic, nihilistic existentialism.

Conclusion

A New Genealogy of Existentialism

1. A new genealogy of existentialism

In *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre sketches a genealogy of existentialism:

> Eighteenth-century atheistic philosophers suppressed the idea of God, but not, for all that, the idea that essence precedes existence. We encounter this idea nearly everywhere: in the works of Diderot, Voltaire, and even Kant. […] Here again [*sc*. in Kant's works], the essence of man precedes his historically primitive existence in nature. Atheistic existentialism, which I represent, is more consistent. It states that if God does not exist, there is at least one being in whom existence precedes essence – a being whose existence comes before its essence, a being who exists before he can be defined by any concept of it. That being is man (Sartre [1946] 2007, 21-22).[308]

From Diderot, Voltaire, and Kant, Sartre leaps seamlessly to 20th-century atheistic existentialism. How is such a large leap to be accounted for? It seems more plausible to hypothesise that there is in fact no leap, as the passage from atheism to the precedence of existence over essence already takes place in Leopardi's writings, right after, and partly in reaction to, Diderot, Voltaire, and Kant, among others. The fact that Sartre conceives of existentialism as a reaction to the same references Leopardi's philosophy was also partly a reaction to, constitutes a further, compelling argument in favour of my general thesis.

[308] Au XVIIIe siècle, dans l'athéisme des philosophes, la notion de Dieu est supprimée, mais non pas pour autant l'idée que l'essence précède l'existence. Cette idée, nous la retrouvons un peu partout : nous la retrouvons chez Diderot, chez Voltaire, et même chez Kant. […] Ainsi, là encore [*sc*. chez Kant], l'essence d'homme précède cette existence historique que nous rencontrons dans la nature. L'existentialisme athée, que je représente, est plus cohérent. Il déclare que si Dieu n'existe pas, il y a au moins un être chez qui l'existence précède l'essence, un être qui existe avant de pouvoir être défini par aucun concept et que cet être c'est l'homme (Sartre 1966, 20-21).

A more coherent account of existentialism can be given if, instead of taking the almost 150-year leap from Kant to Sartre,[309] one considers that Leopardi was already reacting to European Enlightenment and landing to existentialist conclusions, and that his legacy was appreciated and handed down to 20th-century existentialists by Nietzsche, Unamuno, and the other diffractors treated in the Introduction. One might initially be inclined to also place Kierkegaard within this 150-year span of time, yet again, he is not part of this conversation insofar as Sartre starts from the idea of God being suppressed, which is clearly impossible for Kierkegaard. Rather, immediately after Kant, Leopardi suppresses both the idea of God and the idea that essence precedes existence. This consideration also provides an answer to the question of how it is possible that Leopardi and Sartre both land to what can generally be called 'existentialism': it is because they reacted to the same references, as Chapter 1 made clear – Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, English and French sensism, and French and German Enlightenment.

The relevance of existentialism in the history of ideas is a major one, as the many publications on the subject today continue to attest. The main result of existentialism is to have provided perhaps the most far-reaching and radical critique of Platonism and essentialism. If the Platonic assumption of the precedence of essence over existence had hitherto been the default philosophical model, that is no longer the case after existentialism. The identification of Leopardi as the initiator of atheistic existentialism predates, in the ways explained above, the moment when this new line of questioning arises in the history of Western philosophy.

[309] Kant died in 1804 and *Being and Nothingness* was published in 1943.

2. Potential developments

This work has opened the new line of inquiry 'Leopardi and existentialism', which can still be greatly developed well beyond the limits of this essay. Many are the potential directions for development.

As for the relationship between Leopardi and Kierkegaard, for example, I have mostly focused on the differences between them, but they also share important similarities that the scholarship has not yet considered: for instance, they both kept personal, highly multidisciplinary diaries; they both insist on the mass/individual dichotomy;[310] they both level prolonged and harsh criticism to the hypocritical religion of the self-righteous bourgeois class.[311] Starting from these topics, a great deal of original and interesting research could be conducted. Maurice Merleau-Ponty has found less space in this work than I would have hoped, and he could also be fruitfully compared to Leopardi, mainly for the themes of perception and corporeity. In this project I have mainly focused on the so-called 'first Heidegger', i.e. the Heidegger of *Being and Time*, but the 'second Heidegger', too, displays promising similarities with Leopardi, mainly in the notion of poetic language as the 'home' of being and in general in the shift from philosophy to poetry. The same could be said about Simone de Beauvoir, whose mention of Leopardi could be further investigated and possibly considered in relation to the notion of 'ethics of ambiguity', which deeply resonates with Leopardi's own ethics. On a more philological front, it could prove useful to carry out further research on Leopardi's reception in existentialism both in and outside of Italy.[312] Finally, the third chapter

[310] See Leopardi's letter to Fanny Targioni Tozzetti, 5 December 1831, *Dialogo di Tristano e di un amico* in Leopardi 2008, 598, and the *Zibaldone*, passim.
[311] For Leopardi, see *I nuovi credenti* in Leopardi 1997a, 306.
[312] I have written two articles on this issue, which will be out soon, but I was not able to perform a complete and definitive search in all the archives, databases, and collections relevant to the existentialists.

introduced a comparison/contrast between existentialism and logical positivism, which I intend to pursue in my postdoctoral research.

3. Outcomes and impact within and beyond Italian Studies

This work's main outcome which concerns Italianists immediately is the comprehensive re-evaluation of who is usually considered the second most important author in Italian Studies after Dante, if such rankings hold any meaning at all (see for example Veronese 2008). This revaluation is that Leopardi's thought can be considered a form of existentialism, with implications for his entire work. At the same time, as emerged throughout the text, Leopardi has his own existentialism. Thus, adding him to the constellation of the existentialists has the effect of re-configuring the entire movement of existentialism, giving more prominence to some themes and less to others. Like Sartre and akin existentialists, Leopardi theorises what I have called the existentialist principle; he contends that human beings lack any pre-given essence as there is no Necessary Being giving it to them; he grounds the meaning of existence in the irrational (the 'senso dell'animo') rather than reason; and he insists on the omnipresence and even the corporeity of nothingness. Many of these elements, as we have seen, are not present in Kierkegaard and sometimes not even in Nietzsche. *Unlike* Sartre and akin existentialists, however, he attributes great weight to habituation (see Aloisi 2014) and our desire for the Infinite/Impossible (see Costa 2024 and Howells 2000, 95); he insists on boredom rather than anguish; values he calls illusions; freedom is present in his philosophy, but not quite to the same extent in which it shapes Sartre's. Further research can contribute to show how existentialism is reconfigured with the addition of Leopardi, and in turn how Leopardi's thought is reconfigured after his inclusion in the existentialist canon. Building on these data, this project has a claim to impact fields beyond Italian Studies, namely European intellectual history and history of philosophy.

The more general outcome of this work, which concerns European intellectual historians and historians of philosophy, is that Leopardi should be recognised as the initiator of atheistic existentialism, with Kierkegaard more properly positioned as the initiator of religious existentialism only. What impact this outcome is destined to generate is clear, starting from the inclusion of Leopardi in the anthologies and monographs on existentialism to come. More specifically, Leopardi should be positioned right at the beginning of atheistic existentialism, in continuity with Nietzsche, then Sartre and the other atheist existentialists of the 20th-century. By now, all the relevant elements have been presented to make clear that Leopardi is not a 'precursor', 'forerunner' and the like, as if he almost accidentally anticipated the themes that will be typical of a subsequent movement disconnected from him. 'Precursors' or 'anticipators' in this loose sense can perhaps be considered Socrates, Montaigne, or Pascal: with Leopardi, the time is ripe (he is Kierkegaard's contemporary), the foundational ideas of atheistic existentialism are explicitly and consciously expressed in the very language that existentialists will later use ('existence', 'essence', 'posterior/prior', 'nothingness', 'anguish', 'boredom', 'alienation' etc.), and a clear line of direct and indirect influence can be drawn from Leopardi to 20th existentialists.

Of course, the outcome and impact on European intellectual history is going to also feed back positively into Italian Studies. By positioning Leopardi as a pivotal author within one of the major movements of Modern thought, this work opens Italian Studies to new connections and enhances their perceived international relevance.

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