

Interpretation

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Nino Langiulli, *Possibility, Necessity, and Existence. Abbagnano and His Predecessors*. Themes in the History of Philosophy, edited by Edith Wyschogrod (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), xv + 205 pp., \$44.95.

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Nino Langiulli has two aims in the book under review. First, he presents to the American philosophical audience the life and work of the important twentieth-century Italian philosopher Nicola Abbagnano (1901–90), and, second, he discusses the modality of possibility, along with the essentially associated modes of necessity and existence. This metaphysical discussion is prompted by the fact that Abbagnano's own thought centers on the theme of possibility. Langiulli both expresses Abbagnano's ideas about this theme and develops his own commentary, critique, and position. The book is thus both an informative introduction to Abbagnano and a study in speculative philosophy.

Langiulli is well equipped to carry out the project of this book, since he studied for a year with Abbagnano under a Fulbright grant in 1960–61. He has translated and edited Abbagnano's work *Critical Existentialism* and has also edited a volume entitled *The Existentialist Tradition*, which includes selections from Abbagnano. Langiulli credits the late William Barrett with having first suggested the study of possibility in Abbagnano.

The book is divided into three parts. The first is a survey of the thought and the career of Abbagnano, the second is a treatment of Abbagnano's concept of possibility, with an extensive discussion of the sources from which he developed his own position, and the third examines the concept in a more speculative way, with critical comments as a conclusion. A postscript provides a threefold classification of Abbagnano's writings, divided into (1) scholarly studies of historical figures and philosophical themes, (2) speculative philosophical works, and (3) more popular works. Abbagnano, a man of great erudition, is probably best known to American readers for his *Dizionario di filosofia* (1960), one of the major philosophical research instruments in the world. Another important work, his three-volume history, *Storia della filosofia*, first appeared in 1946–50, with a second edition in 1969. He has also written books on Emile Meyerson, Ockham, and Aristotle, as well as many systematic works expressing his own thought and commenting on the phenomenon of modern science. He was editor of the journal *Rivista di filosofia* and was noted as a teacher of Umberto Eco and Gianni Vattimo.

I

In the first part of the book, the exposition of Abbagnano's life and work, Langiulli distinguishes four stages in his subject's thought. In a first period, from the 1920s to about 1935, Abbagnano tried to show the limitations of reason against the somewhat romantic rationalist philosophy of Italian neo-Hegelians like Croce. A second phase began with work published in 1935; Abbagnano became more interested in metaphysical principles, trying to avoid both objectivism and subjectivism. The third stage began in 1939 and extended to about 1955, a period in which Abbagnano developed the "positive existentialism" that is often associated with his name; he uses but also criticizes the work of Heidegger and Jaspers, and one of the crucial elements in his critique is the concept of possibility: Abbagnano claims that the "negative existentialism" of Heidegger and Jaspers begins by appealing to human possibilities, but ends by defining human being in terms of a structure of impossibilities. Abbagnano's use of the mode of possibility is thus not developed primarily in the context of logic or of a metaphysics of substance, but in the context of human existence.

The fourth and final phase distinguished by Langiulli extended from the late 1950s to the end of Abbagnano's life; in this period Abbagnano further developed his positive existentialism, along with criticisms of theistic existentialism and a critique of Sartre. The basis of his critique of theistic existentialism, which is directed against Lavelle, Le Senne, and Marcel, is that in it the possibility proper to human beings is subsumed under an inevitable fulfillment or salvation, "a guaranteed realization of [human] possibilities" (p. 16); possibility, Abbagnano claims, becomes absorbed by necessity or inevitability in this theistic context. In his critique of Sartre he claims that Sartre makes all human possibilities equivalent, justifies any choice at all, and equates freedom with arbitrariness. Abbagnano claims that such arbitrariness implies the impossibility of choice, which needs to be supported by commitment and by an appeal to the preferred value of what is chosen; as Langiulli states it, for Abbagnano "freedom is not simply indifferent choice but . . . the possibility of choice" (p. 21).

Langiulli shows that Abbagnano makes use of, and responds to, many recent or contemporary authors; besides those already mentioned, he uses Kierkegaard, Husserl, Carnap, Peirce, Dewey, and Quine. Abbagnano thought that his positive existentialism had much in common with American pragmatism, and he tried to combine his existentialism with a radical empiricism, using his concept of possibility as tool: Langiulli writes, "An experience . . . would be a 'possibility of x '— x designating anything whatever—that is repeatable" (p. 26). Thus, Abbagnano can serve as a figure by whom many of the schools and movements of the twentieth century are reflected and exploited, and a figure through whom we can obtain an informative picture of the Italian philosophy of this century.

To further sharpen the picture of Abbagnano's thought, Langiulli compares his writing with some of the work of Wilfrid Sellars and Richard Rorty. In the section on Rorty, Langiulli develops Abbagnano's ideas concerning the nature of philosophical reflection, ideas that were a special concern in his thinking in the late 1970s and the 1980s; in contrast with Rorty, who disavows philosophy, Abbagnano would consider philosophy to be a valid human possibility, but one that, as a possibility, might indeed fail or be unfulfilled: "its achievements and conquests are not guaranteed in advance" (p. 35). Philosophy's work is "to bring to sight the man-world relationship, to investigate the problems of that relationship, and to propose various modifications of it" (p. 36). Langiulli continues this expository part of his book by showing Abbagnano's influence on Umberto Eco and on the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo, whose concept of *pensiero debole* is examined: a form of thinking that eschews rigid rationalism and stresses the finitude of human reason. Finally, Langiulli contrasts Abbagnano and Derrida. Strangely, Derrida's thought leads to a kind of infinitude, since it allows no limit on reinterpretations and differences and permits "the absolute free play of sense/nonsense" (p. 52); by recognizing the claims of sameness as well as those of difference, both grounded on possibility, Abbagnano restricts "the joystick of *différance*."

II

From Langiulli's exposition, it is easy to see how the concept of possibility takes on deep significance for Abbagnano. It serves as the center of his positive existentialism and thus is important for his understanding of human being and human affairs, but it is also developed in his philosophy of being. It is also clear, from developments in the history of thought, that possibility is an endangered philosophical species; it is all too easy to reduce possibility to either necessity or actuality, the other two modalities of being that accompany it. It takes considerable philosophical sophistication to avoid making the possible a mere cover for what is inevitable and necessary, or just a faded copy of what actually exists. The reality and the density of the possible, of things that are truly only possible, is not easy to capture, either in philosophical analysis or in ordinary thinking about being and human affairs. We always tend to acknowledge the actually determined instead of the merely possible. It is curious that possibility seems to be the most fragile of the modalities; we are much less inclined to "reduce" necessity and actuality to their opposites than we are to allow the possible to disappear.

In the second part of his book, Langiulli shows how Abbagnano makes use of classical figures in the history of philosophy to articulate his own insight into the reality of the possible. If Part One abounded in names drawn from recent and contemporary thought, Part Two abounds in authors from antiquity and from early modern philosophy. Abbagnano finds in Plato's *Sophist* one of the

strongest statements of the importance of the possible. He interprets Plato's derivation of the major forms of being in the light of possibility; he reads *Sophist* 247–48 as stating that being or existence is to be defined as possibility. He also claims that Plato's derivation of the other forms (motion and rest, identity and difference, and even body and soul) can be done only if being is taken precisely as possibility; that is, the fact that being takes on such opposite forms is based on its possibility of being either the one or the other, and not necessarily one or the other. Langiulli supports Abbagnano's reading by a further appeal to commentators on Plato: possibility allows us to see "how opposites exist and are said to exist without contradiction" (p. 67). Plato shows that being is both one and many, and this can be true because being "can" be both: "possibility is ontologically prior to actuality" (p. 71).

The treatment of Plato is followed by a short discussion of Aristotle. Abbagnano finds Aristotle less perceptive than Plato on the theme of possibility: in Aristotle, actuality and necessity are said to be granted different sorts of priorities over possibility, and Aristotle, despite efforts to the contrary, is said to have fallen prey to the Master Argument of Diodorus Cronus and the Megarians. For Aristotle, the "potential" (or what Abbagnano calls "the virtual") must be realized if it is to be truly potential; but then it becomes reduced to the necessary. In response to Abbagnano's claim on this point, it seems to me that he does not give enough weight to the category of things that happen "for the most part," *epi to polu*, in Aristotle. It also seems to me that Aristotle's strong insistence on the reality of change, as well as his treatments of choice and chance, lead him to recognize without question the ontological importance of the possible.

Kant and Kierkegaard are the other two authors treated extensively in the second part of the book, with lesser comments about Leibniz, who reduced possibilities to merely mental or logical existence. Kant, however, is seen by Abbagnano as restoring a valid understanding of the possible after Leibniz's misunderstanding. Kant, for Abbagnano, does not contrast the real and the possible; rather, he takes the real as such to be the possible. Langiulli examines both the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Critique of Judgment*, along with Abbagnano's interpretations, to show that Abbagnano downplays the idealistic tendency in Kant's understanding of possibility and concludes that Kant equates true being with possibility; the existent is that which can be verified and found to be true. This positive aspect of possibility is overemphasized in Kant and its negative aspect is neglected, however.

Abbagnano says that Kierkegaard misstates what possibility is when he blends it with infinity. Abbagnano says that human possibility is by its nature limited, but that Kierkegaard claims that everything is possible. The consequence is dread, the "a priori anxiety over the infinity and indeterminacy of possibilities" (p. 96). Abbagnano claims that Kierkegaard uses possibility in ambiguous ways and ultimately denies its reality in human affairs, partly be-

cause he mixes human possibilities with the divine: he thereby reduces the purely human either to impossibility and inevitable failure, or to the assured accomplishment of salvation. The section on Kierkegaard also contains an interesting study of the difference between contraries and contradictories. Contraries are opposites within a category, such as hot-cold, dark-light, up-down, and rest-motion. Each is the positive opposite of the other. Contradictories are opposites in which one is the explicit denial or destruction of the other. Hot versus not-hot is not the same difference as hot versus cold; the first is merely the denial of hot, not the affirmation of cold.

This theme of contrary versus contradictory is then applied to possibility and the other modalities, but not without some difficulty for the reader. Indeed, this section reflects the difficulties endemic to any expository study, the Chinese boxes of quotation and paraphrase: Langiulli paraphrasing Abbagnano paraphrasing Kierkegaard, with Aristotle also introduced into the mixture (and add to this the voice of the present reviewer). When this complex presentational structure is applied to concepts as abstract as possibility, necessity, and actuality, the argument inevitably becomes difficult to follow. A greater use of concrete examples might have helped the reader follow the exposition more easily.

III

In the third part of the book, Langiulli looks at Abbagnano's own treatment of possibility. Abbagnano distinguishes three notions of possibility: (1) the non-contradictory, (2) the inevitable, or the necessarily realizable, and (3) that which can be or not be; or, as Langiulli suggests, that which can be *and* not be. A chapter is devoted to each, and the third sense is taken as the proper sense of possibility. I should mention that in the chapter examining the second sense, there is an extensive treatment of Nicholai Hartmann, as well as of Hobbes and Spinoza. Also, an important distinction is drawn by Abbagnano between possibility and contingency.

In developing "the third and proper sense of possibility" (p. 127), Abbagnano distinguishes two different kinds of uses of the verb "to be" (*essere*): the predicative and the existential. Three theories of predication are distinguished: the theory of inherence, the theory of identity, and the theory of relation. Abbagnano's own understanding of predication is to take it as expressing a relation, not among concepts but among beings. However, the predicational sense of the verb is ultimately grounded in the existential sense, which, in keeping with Abbagnano's general philosophy, is taken to be an expression of being as possibility.

Although Langiulli makes critical comments at various points during his exposition, he summarizes his criticisms, in the last chapter of the book, under

two themes. First, he insists that possibility itself cannot be taken as the fundamental sense of being without some appeal to necessity: it is necessary that being be the possible. Thus, by a kind of retortion, Langiulli shows that possibility cannot be separated from necessity. Second, he shows that all terms need to be defined by being contrasted with their opposites or contraries, and a term can be better defined if we have several contexts in which contraries can be brought forth. The true, for example, is better determined when it is contrasted not only with the false, but also with the fictional. Possibility, then, cannot be understood or defined if it stands alone and is opposed to nothing. "Necessity, therefore, constitutes the 'specifying difference' in terms of which existence itself is properly defined—as 'possibility.' . . . To define and describe [possibility], he must make use of one of its opposites, necessity. . ." (p. 172). A third criticism is developed in the penultimate chapter, where Langiulli comments on Abbagnano's frequent insistence that he wishes to avoid metaphysical speculation and restrict himself to an empiricism: Langiulli claims that Abbagnano does indeed carry out metaphysical speculation when he locates the primary sense of being in possibility; what Abbagnano does avoid is a kind of necessitarian, rationalist metaphysics, but it would be wrong to identify metaphysics as such with that sort of speculation.

It is very difficult to apply the modal terms of possibility, necessity, and actuality to the whole of things and to being (as opposed to using such terms in limited regions of being). This book, drawing on Abbagnano's own scholarship and philosophical insight, gives us many fine examples of successes in this difficult task; it reminds us of the need for philosophers to pay attention to the grand issues of being and to take on themes like the difference between the possible and the necessary, or the possible and the actual. The book also provides the reader with valuable information about a major figure in twentieth-century Italian philosophy.