

Jeanne Hersch's realist existentialism. Reasoning on the human between nature and freedom

Piergiacomo Severini

Department of Philosophical, Pedagogical
and Economic-Quantitative Sciences
Università G. d'Annunzio di Chieti Pescara
31 Via dei Vestini 31
Chieti, CH 66013, Italy
E-mail: severini.piergiacomo@gmail.com

Abstract:

Jeanne Hersch's realist existentialism is an original point of arrival in the panorama of contemporary Existentialism. The Ginevean brings together Kant, Bergson, Jaspers and she promotes a practical philosophy that preserves the existential dialectics between reason and existence through freedom, adding the centrality of reality to it. The aim of this paper is to introduce the heterogeneous Herschian path and to point out some relevant aspects of the way in which nature and freedom interact in the different phases of her philosophy. Hersch searches for the human ground moving from a real freedom and, after having elaborated an inner freedom, a political liberty and a responsible freedom, she finally enlightens the connection between the existential point of view and the world. In this sense, it is possible to define Jeanne Hersch as the gesture of existentialism, since she re-elaborates the theoretical existentialist tradition and applies this re-elaboration to the problems of her time, giving a practical model of existential authenticity.

Keywords: Jeanne Hersch, Karl Jaspers, Immanuel Kant, Henri Bergson, existentialism, realism, practical philosophy

In *La libertà incarnata*, Francesca De Vecchi defines Jeanne Hersch a *realist existentialist* that develops a *gradualist theory of freedom*, which is careful both to the values of reference and to their actualisation in every day life or in the projects of an existence (De Vecchi, 2008). Approaching a philosopher that also deals with pedagogy, politics, human rights, sciences, medicine and other important social battles of her time, is not so simple: using an image of *Textes*, without a valid reference, we risk to enter a labyrinth in which the more we get closer to the center, the more we forget our goal to reach the exit (Hersch, 1962).

The aim of this paper is to clarify the steps that lead to a paradigm that is still largely unknown, avoiding to explain some details of the gradualist theory of freedom and trying to *mimic* Hersch¹, in order to hold together her reflections and her real experiences, which are both essential to understand her philosophy. To do this, in the first part of this paper, I will introduce

Hersch's experience, bringing together her education, her bibliography and her life. I will retrace the most relevant milestones of her life and the most important passages of her main works, highlighting in which way they develop the dialectics between nature and freedom that characterises the Herschian path. In the second part, I will consider some gains of this path and clarify the originality of Hersch's paradigm, briefly presenting some points that should be considered, when trying to place Hersch in the philosophical and existential panorama.

Today, few people remember Hersch's thought, even in her homeland, and most of them consider her just for her political contribution. Some researches have tried to go deeper, in order to clarify the originality and the relevance of the Genevean's reflections in philosophy and for the problems of our contemporary time, but there is no scientific bibliography in English that contextualises and introduces her from a general philosophical point of view. This paper outlines a general framework that does not have enough space to deepen all the details that deserve further explanations, so it could be a general introduction for showing the coherence of an etherogeneous path, indicating issues to be explored in future research, especially from non-philosophical points of view.

The realist root of Hersch's reflection

Hersch's first passion is literature. When she finished her studies, she decided to enroll in the Faculty of Arts and Literature at the University of Geneva, starting to work on a thesis about the value of image in Henri Bergson. She published her final version, *Les images dans l'oeuvre de M. Bergson*, in 1931. In 1929, the Genevean spent a semester in Heidelberg to learn German, and she came to know by chance about the courses of Karl Jaspers: although she was unable to understand the lessons for her linguistic limits, she felt that in the professor's words there was the answer to an original problem, that immediately became the object of her commitment². Once she got her degree, Hersch decided to come back to Heidelberg in 1931, to deepen the knowledge of Jaspers and, after few months, she moved to Freiburg-im-Breisgau, in order to get to know Martin Heidegger, who, in her opinion, was the emblem of the Nazi thought and the disembodied reflection³.

The courage of a twenty-year old Jew that decides to go to the heart of Nazism, few months before the emanation of the racial laws, is already a clear signal of Hersch's attention to what happens in her time, to understand it, to live it and finally to give a shape to this meeting. The works that are born from the first two meetings of Hersch will remain the pillars of her thought. In *Les images dans l'oeuvre de M. Bergson*, which is the first of these two meetings, the Genevean follows up the intention of Bergson to give back importance to reality. She studies how, in Bergson, images succeed in being a medium between the concept and the world, becoming a symbol that contains something of both the extremes: "I therefore call 'image' any figure of style that aims at giving the idea a more sensitive form" (Hersch, 2001, 101-102). Philosophy should move from the experience of this condition, which constitutes an originally deeper ground than the barren learning of knowledge.

Reducing understanding to a rational evaluation that fits in a logical system risks to draw abstract conclusions from a material of concrete origin. Thanks to Bergson, Hersch understands that we cannot sacrifice lived experience to pure logic and we have to compare, to look, to listen to the world, searching for an appropriate language to theoretically form the empirical-sensitive experiences that the subject uses to create something real from such a comparison. The *lived world* and the *reasoned world* cannot be separated and the Bergsonian image is a real transposition from one world to the other⁴.

The study of the role of image in Bergson clarifies Hersch's original interest: to rehabilitate the dimension of the real in which the human can flourish, *com-prebending* the ever-dominant intelligence and the ordinary experience⁵. The subject must own both the strict order that comes from the *philosopher's gaze* and the wonder that comes from the *artist's gaze* (Hersch, 2001, 122), so the real experience of what goes beyond logic must still play a central role, to give form to what would otherwise remain unexpressed. This meta-philosophical reflection on the twofold constitutive instance of philosophy is the first move towards realism in Hersch's analysis of Bergson's philosophy.

What is clear in Hersch's commentary on Bergson's most famous works is that the subject's theoretical path is always marked by the relationship with the matter in the world, because "things are there" (Hersch, 2001, 122). This matter welcomes the subject, until he modifies it and creates something new in it, after lingering near it and listening to it. This constant presence of the world in the subjective path, as the ground to start from or to engrave in, is the second Herschian move towards realism.

In third instance, Bergson covers somehow for Hersch the role that Hume had for Kant, with his intuition of a reversed metaphysics by things to ideas and, even more, with a freedom as *organic development*, "necessary and free at the same time, because it realises itself through an inner law of the subject and it is actually identifiable with him" (Hersch, 2001, 141). Freedom is unpredictable, as Bergson's theory of *élan vital* stresses, but it also follows an inner law that somehow gives a direction to the subject. Once woken up, Hersch opens her eyes and discovers to be in the world, but something still misses her and, without this something, reality risks to flow without leaving traces: there is no moral decision to take and the natural development of our being tends to drift into determinism⁶.

The existential freedom

Knowing existentialism through Jaspers, Hersch finds a dam to reality flow. The approach to Jaspers, with the dialogue between existence and reason that he represents, leads to *L'illusion philosophique*, in 1936. In this work, Hersch improves the metaphilosophical intention that had already animated *Les images dans l'oeuvre de M. Bergson* and states in a clearer way which role philosophy covers in her horizon. With Jaspers and, before him, Kant, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, the possibility of a total and objective knowledge is by now impossible: a philosophy that pretends to give certain explanations, in competition with science, becomes unthinkable. After Jaspers, philosophy

risks its death, because its illusion of truth has been disclosed: “Will philosophy exit from the dead end to which it has been reduced from the loss of her fundamental illusion?” (Hersch, 2005, 143).

Herschian pessimism is just a provocation: the scientific soul risks to lead to the death of philosophy, once its illusion has been disclosed, but this move can leave some space to the other soul of philosophy, which is situated more in depth. If today old systems as those of Aristotle, Saint Thomas Aquinas or Hegel are still studied, it is not for the knowledge that they bring, but rather for the example of authenticity that can be found in them. Here the twofold constitutive instance of philosophy returns, because the Genevan asserts that “there is therefore in every philosophical problem – whatever its content is and whoever may ask it – a *duplicity*: its real sense is a decision of the subject, and its explicit sense is the knowledge of an object” (Hersch, 2005, 28). In great philosophers, one can find their engagement towards the truth that they think to have found, a *simple gesture* that is present in every thought and around which they have built their whole life. Philosophers are the best example of how the subject has to discover his own *inner law* and to engage his freedom towards it.

The simple gesture becomes the metaphysical foundation of the subject from an existential point of view and it is for this reason that the freedom that the subject uses for choosing the simple gesture can be defined *existential*. The reader can understand through the philosophers’ testimony how to engage his *existential freedom* and how to use it, in order to do something of his existence and to start *being*. In this way, the reader does not earn some objective knowledge, but rather a subjective truth⁷. Once left aside scientific totality, philosophy can finally become a model of authenticity, to discover, in the depth of every subject, a freedom as the necessity to find the simple gesture at the basis of every human⁸.

This means that, while searching for the ground of freedom, the intrinsic nature of the subject, with his Kantian determination in space and in time, is not the only limit that freedom can realistically meet. With existential freedom, the *development* that Bergson theorises in his *organic* point of view on freedom is still original, but no more arbitrary, because the subject that wants *to be* has to engage his freedom towards his organically oriented simple gesture. A natural tendency is present since the beginning, but the subject is free to search for it, to adhere to it and to make something out of it. Only in this way, quite far from a naïve free will, a biological life can become a human existence. For the moment, the path towards freedom has to pass through the enhancement of the real datum and the engagement that gets a simple gesture from the inner law. Some points are still unclear: what happens in daily life, in a world in which there are not only philosophers with their readers and when choices are not so essential for the subject?

The ontological freedom

In the mid-30s, Hersch has already found a double example of authenticity at the base of her own simple gesture, between freedom and reality. It is time for her to apply this theoretical

simple gesture to the real world. Rather than knowing the world studying it, she prefers to discover it. She does not opt for a safe university career and, in 1933, she starts teaching to the *Ecole Internationale*, where she will stay up to 1955. Since the air is unbreathable in Europe, she takes two trips as preceptor, one in South America, between 1935 and 1936, and another in Siam, between 1938 and 1939, as private teacher of the royal family. Only in 1942, thanks to a scholarship of the *Fondation Lucerne* and to the possibility to decrease the amount of hours of teaching, she starts her doctoral research, which will lead to the publication of *L'être et la forme*. This work, together with the teaching degree lesson at the University of Geneva in 1947, *Discontinuité des perspectives humaines*, is the point of arrival of this second phase of Hersch's thought.

In a letter written while preparing her doctoral thesis, Hersch affirms that *form* is a *conditio sine qua non* of existence, moving a further step in her research on the free ground of the human: a human thought that wants to transcend form falls in an idealist illusion, while a reasoning that is unable of going over form falls in an animal materialism⁹. Things turn more complicated than in *L'illusion philosophique*: the free man, once received an existence and new eyes on the world, begins to walk through it, meeting various objects that, with Kant, are not revealed *in-themselves*. Hersch calls them *matter*. When the subject is interested in an object, he tries to exert his *hold* on it, and from the violent clash between the greedy *hold* and the impenetrable *matter*, he gets the *form*, something with the imprint of the two strengths from which it has been produced. Since matter is unknowable in-itself, the dimension of the subject will not be the world, but rather the *reality*, as the set of the forms that the subject *incarnates* in the world¹⁰.

Through the ontological study of *L'être et la forme*, *existential freedom* is now extended to every human existence – not only to philosophers and to their readers – as the top of a pyramid, which can be defined *ontological freedom* and is about everyone's daily life. The novel *Temps alternés*¹¹ is the attempt to apply such theoretical thought that would otherwise be abstract. The protagonist of the book lives a double love story with Pierre, who is her ideal man, even if he seems to be not interested in her, and Marc, her first true love. The young woman understands that Marc is not the right man for her, comparing him with Pierre and feeling that Marc cannot really find a place in the *reality* that she is actualising in her existence. Pierre represents for the protagonist of the novel an ideal, which guides the real actualisation of her existence. In the same way, *existential freedom* guides *ontological freedom*, which determines decisions in every day life. On the one side, *existential freedom* is the content of the simple gesture, when to opt for something different means to give up on oneself, as for Antigone, forced not to bury Polyneices. On the other side, *ontological freedom* deals with choices that are not essential, but they are still needed to follow a practice of good life, respecting the principles that one feels as absolute.

The practical knowledge of the world leads Hersch to discover that while man walks, he finds things and he has the power to decide to let them enter his own existence. With a judgment of value, man gives a form and welcomes in his own reality that object that “is not yet but deserves to be there” (Hersch, Dufour, Dufour, 2006, 78). In *La transcendance du singulier*,

Hersch outlines the relationship between the worthy object, the capacity for freedom and the novelty of a free reality in the world: the more the objective matter is worthy, the stronger the subject will try to exert his hold on it, giving a subjective form to it, the more he will introduce a novelty in the natural world¹². This novelty is the ontological production of the subject, who does not add new matter to the natural world, but rather gives a new order and form to it, trying to make room for what is worthy for him in it. In this way, the human freedom that acts because it *wants* – and not simply because it *has to* – can *decrySTALLISE* the world natural determinism (Hersch, 2006, 7).

At the end of Hersch's ontological reflection, it is possible to draw some new conclusions about the dialectics between freedom and nature in the human. First, it is clear that the human subject has to use his freedom to build his existence in the world, starting from the natural dimension of his inner law and of the matter, and coming back to it thanks to the incarnation of new forms in it. The point of arrival of Hersch's reflection in the first half of the century is an *inner freedom* that is committed to what is worthy for the subject, through existential freedom, and actualises this commitment in the incarnation of forms that constitute images of what is worthy for the subject better and better, through ontological freedom¹³.

Second, such gradual incarnation of what is worthy for the subject leads to a gradualist theory of freedom, in which ontological freedom is used for building daily a reality that reflects the simple gesture, once the subject has engaged his existential freedom, choosing in an *absolute instant* something that is unconditionally necessary¹⁴. Being free means constantly striving to make existence a coherent image of that decision that has founded it, in the point in which freedom and necessity get in touch for the subject, and to incarnate this image in a real form. Here the dialectics between nature and freedom is more present than ever, because the subject can experience something that is naturally necessary for him, but he is free to commit to it and to incarnate it in the *mode* he prefers.

Third, it is possible to conclude that both freedom and nature deal with necessity, but they do so in two different ways. On the one side, nature belongs to the order of facts and it is regulated by the deterministic principle of cause and effect, so there is a heteronomous relationship with necessity. In the order of facts, necessity determines what happens and the natural course goes as it has to. On the other side, freedom belongs to the order of human being, in which the ontological activity of giving form depends on the subjective sense. The subject uses his freedom to give being to what is worth being, namely something that the subject feels as necessary as the highest value. In the order of human being, the subject decides whether he will use his freedom to incarnate his necessary object or not and in which mode he will incarnate it, so there is an autonomous relationship with necessity.

The political liberty

Hersch is not yet satisfied with her research. In 1951, she gets a scholarship from the *Fondation*

Pro Helvetia, to temporarily leave university and to bring forth some studies in Paris. A new phase of her thought begins: in 1956, she publishes *Idéologies et réalité*, the last systematic work in her literature; subsequently, with her affirmation as international lecturer, she will appear in television or radio, collaborate with newspapers and write short papers on the most varied matters, to give a rigorous opinion on the problems proposed from time to time.

In the second half of her life, she tries to go even deeper in reality, applying what she has theoretically understood in her life, still giving importance to the world she lives in, with all its challenges. In many interviews, the Genevean has affirmed that human rights are the challenge of this age, indeed politics and human rights are her main interest in these years. From the 1950s, she takes part to international issues and collaborates with national, European and world association. The most remarkable collaboration is that with Unesco, of which she has been manager of the Division of Philosophy between 1966 and 1968 and member of the executive committee in the 1970s.

Behind all these choices and commitments, there is the consciousness that the subjective freedom that she has defined until 1950 is not enough. The theoretical approach to political ideas and human rights is quite complex, so here the attention will be focused just on the position that they cover in Herschian horizon. The correct reflection and application of *existential freedom* and *ontological freedom* do not consider that man is not alone in the world and he has to live with other men. If up to this moment Hersch has dealt with one root of human – the *soul* and its *freedom*, now it is important to consider the other root – *body*, which is implicitly in Herschian reasoning from a long time, in her *realism* as enhancement of the natural component of human. Rather than moving between *freedom* and *reality*, the subject now swings between *freedom* and *body*¹⁵. After actualising freedom in something real, it is crucial to consider that man is both freedom and body, so he has certain biological demands. This leads to a deeper analysis of the human dialectics between freedom and nature from a different point of view.

This perspective adjustment has two fundamental consequences. First of all, if man is also body, close to the potentially free act, there is also the submission to natural laws and the consequent need to preserve one's own life. Secondly, if man is not only freedom but also body, actualising existence in a reality is not enough, because freedom can be threatened by other men that try to preserve their life. The biological demands inevitably involve the use of strength. Knowing how freedom works is only one of the conditions for being free, because, in addition, one must be sure to have the right external conditions for being free. At this step, Hersch speaks for the first time of *responsibility*, when the evil appears as a likely degeneration of something that man cannot live without. In *Idéologies et réalité*, politics is born when man recognises the possibility of the evil: "Man is exactly this being that, without getting rid of the evil (in himself), knows it and declares war to him. Thanks to this, he is a juridical and political animal" (Hersch, *Idéologies*, 94).

In this hard task, it is important to bring together the *moral demand*, represented by Kant,

and the *demand of result*, embodied by Machiavelli¹⁶. In this way, it should be easier to clarify the *practical antinomy*¹⁷ that founds good politics, namely the awareness that man cannot live without the use of strength. It is necessary to learn how to use *power* to keep the use of the natural *force* under control, paying attention to the values to be preserved, as well as to the success or the result (De Monticelli, 2017). As the use of ontological freedom must take as an end the incarnation of the worthy object to which existential freedom is committed, so natural force must become power, taking as an end the worthy preservation of human inner freedom.

According to Hersch, if the reflection on freedom has to be even more realistic, it must consider that inner freedom needs “outer conditions of liberty” (Hersch, 1982, 2) that preserve the human capacity of acting freely. Politics is materialised in an institution that guarantees a *political liberty* while always discussing about the best application of this statute, a space to be held empty, to allow every citizen to fill it with his inner freedom, where the public dimension must not absorb the private one¹⁸. A space where the dignity of a free human can always find a shelter from a raw use of force.

The responsible freedom

The political reflection, with its preservation of an empty space, is still too abstract for Hersch's realism. If the danger of the evil is constant and the natural temptation of using *force* instead of *power* is definitely strong, a *détour philosophique* is needed, to catch what sciences cannot see, aiming at a horizon of sense to definitely win the temptation, still saving freedom¹⁹. Thanks to *Idéologies et réalité*, Hersch finds in political liberty a negative duty not to invade in any way the space left empty for inner freedom, but this work does not explain how to find a positive *equal right for all* that implies the respect of the inner freedom of all the other human beings²⁰.

The problem is: how to find a universal ground to preserve an antifoundationalist root such as freedom? The solution is found thanks to the engagement to human rights. Hersch used her prestigious position in Unesco to publish *Le droit d'être un homme* in 1969, a collection of fragments, traditions, famous texts coming from the whole world and concerning freedom. This collection shows that the immediately recognisable capability to freely choose leads to an idea of human dignity that is common to every part of the World in every time and not only to Western thought. Finally, the reflection on human rights demonstrates that the inner freedom described by the first Hersch is a *fundamental exigence* that constitutes the universal ground of the human.

De Vecchi notes that the fundamental exigence becomes the real experience of the Kantian *categorical imperative*. *Le droit d'être un homme* proves that the categorical imperative of the human fundamental exigence does not belong only to the *noumenon* and it can be experienced in the world, in the universal human capacity of acting freely, in every time and in every space²¹. Behind the pluralism that nowadays permeates every aspect of common life, there is an anthropological unity in the background, thanks to existential freedom, which characterises

men. In such fundamental exigence, Hersch finds the answer she was searching for, a freedom that forces to go to the root, without forcing to any specific root (De Monticelli, 2015): if he wants to exist, every subject must discover the object that he wants fully and use his freedom to incarnate it, but then every existence actualises its freedom in a different mode.

At the end of her path, the real experience of the fundamental exigence of freedom obliges Hersch to elaborate a *responsible freedom*²² that adds the recognition of the other's freedom to the exercise of one's own freedom. This freedom is responsible precisely because it does not only have to worry about being and becoming a real existence - as inner freedom does -, but also to do this respecting others' freedom. A subject can be free only relating himself to the other, but the relationship cannot exist, if he does not recognise and does not guarantee the equal dignity of whom is nearby him. Hersch does not deepen the role of the narrative dimension and of the recognition that comes from the other for the personal identity, but she cares about promoting a free action that respects, preserves, enhances the other's action.

Responsible freedom is the final result of Hersch's research on the free foundation of human, because it remembers to every man the duty of finding a way for the subjective incarnation of one's existence *while* taking good care of the other's freedom in always-new modes, in a world that changes continuously. In the second half of her life, Hersch understands that the use of existential and ontological freedom must be tolerant (Hersch, 2008; Hersch, 1995) and the authentic existence has to respect both the simple gesture of the subject and the others' one or, in other words, that no idea can be more important than the real human dignity of a person. If politics reaches the negative duty of not invading the empty space of *political freedom*, human rights add to it the positive, methodological principles of the *not owned transcendence* and the *absolute decision of the other*²³. To sum up, at the end of the Herschian path between freedom and nature, the actualisation of human being's authentic freedom has to: find its natural inner law; engage towards an ideal simple gesture, to find in the material datum an occasion to give form to such simple gesture; decrystallise the natural world thanks to its free reordering through subjective forms; responsibly respect the other's fundamental exigence.

Hersch's realist reflection on human rights leaves two legacies. The first one is the battle against angelism, namely the pretension to be able to live without the bond with the world and the use of strength that it involves. As shown above with practical antinomy, the subject's soul can never be separated from his body, so we must always deal with our natural limits/demands and with the real situations, dynamics and problems of the world we live in, in order to *be present in our own time* (Hersch, Dufour, Dufour, 2006). The second one is the duty of recalibrating human rights defense in every place and in every time, since theoretical freedom involves changing challenges in the imperfection of the real world. Human rights obligation is more ethical than moral, because they enter the phenomonic dimension and they become the experience of a meeting, an experience with a normative validity, which gives to politics some instructions for preserving the political empty space²⁴. Consequentially, from the 1950s, once elaborated

her theoretical, subjective horizon, Hersch has preferred to develop her real, intersubjective engagement, helping to give boundaries to contemporary science, technique, education, politics, medicine, economy. In four words, to *search for the sense* in her own time.

Bringing existentialism from theoria to poiesis

After having mimed Hersch, it should be clear in which sense her interpretation of Bergson, Jaspers and, through him, Kant, leads to a philosophy that is made up of reality, existence and reason. The result is what De Vecchi defines a *practical philosophy*²⁵, composed by a moment for the *theoria*, as reflection between reason and existence to find values and to establish a good behaviour, and a moment for the *poiesis*, as actualisation of the *theoria* in a new existence in the world. Hersch has shown how to do this in her thought, elaborating her position between 1931 and 1956 and actualising it for the rest of her time in the interventions on particular problems in her time. She has done this also in her life, taking time to find her simple gesture and going then to test it by acting in the world and trying to give some solutions through it. Since in the existentialist panorama it is always essential to move from the personal experience to understand one's thought, this practical philosophy from *theoria* to *poiesis* is exactly what is hidden behind the definition "being present to her own time", which Hersch loved to give of herself, leading to a *praxis* that actualises *theoria* in a gradual, daily *poiesis*. This philosophical position has some implications that deserve to be considered.

First, at the end of the Herschian path, there is the awareness that the human dimension must always find a balance between two extremes that it can never reach: world and transcendence, matter and form, the use of strength between ethics and result, reaching the deepest dichotomy, between freedom and body. It is this harmonious equilibrium that, Hersch says implicitly in some passages of her literature, Bergson and Jaspers have not succeeded in finding, because the first has been too unbalanced towards body and reality, the second towards freedom and transcendence. If the nature of man was just one, this unity could have tried to turn into totality, instead the man that tries to reduce himself to the natural datum makes the *beast* and the man that tries to reach the sky makes the *angel*, but none of them is free (Hersch, 2005, 40).

Free man must be saved from a persuasive and threatening objectivity, which requires an alienating answer. Free man must be able to find his own authentic realisation fighting against a world and a matter hostilely impregnable – through *body* – and leaving a scar on them, to change them and to leave a proof of him – through *freedom*. If a unity as possession of the natural or transcendental laws was possible, what would happen to originality? If truth was conquered, how an engaged choice and the human dignity could be preserved?

Second, Herschian philosophy is a point of arrival that values the roads opened by Kant, Bergson and Jaspers, trying to keep them in dialogue, in order to enhance their possibilities. In the first instance, approaching the insuperable Kantian formalism with Jaspers' existentialism allows to create an occasion of dialogue with the *noumenon* in the *phenomenon* for the *reason* of the

Copernican Revolution, because, thanks to Bergson's influence, transcendentals like form, freedom and transcendence can be met in the world. In the second instance, Bergsonian metaphysics, which starts from reality and arrives to concepts through *intuition*, finds a more stable basis thanks to Jaspers's Kant, namely the freedom that can be actualised in a real object as a reference in the world that flows, choosing in dialogue with reason and existence. In the third instance, the essential dialogue between reason and existence, which Jaspers formulates moving from Kant, rediscovers at the root of the subject a freedom that, through Bergson's definition of *organic development*, is less transcendent and finds a support for staying grounded, experimenting the datum as indispensable, and the world as occasion for meeting the transcendence and actualising existence.

Third, Hersch succeeds in going over the frequent accusations to existentialism, which she has discussed with the main exponents of the French existentialism, like Wahl, Marcel and Sartre, since she was a student. Existentialism was said to appeal transcendence too much, reaching irrationalism, to give value to negative categories such as anguish, shipwreck or the heideggerian *being-toward-death*, to despise society and move critics to it from an ivory tower. The attention to the practical actualisation of the theoretical reflection, together with the importance of reality and the natural world, as the matter to give form to and the dimension where to "test existence" (Hersch, 2006, 114), are relevant clues that an existential perspective that preserves a positive relationship with the world and the action is still possible. In this sense, world and action are essential elements for existence in the Genevan's path and Tarantino is right when she states that Herschian philosophy can be summed up in the principle "being is doing" (Tarantino, 2007).

A last point deserves a quick explanation: the awareness of the world richness has always sustained Hersch, although she prefers the authenticity of the burden of freedom to the safety of a necessary Truth. So fourth, it is possible to reread Hersch's existential path as a huge work of restitution, to properly transmit the wonder that gives sense to every gesture and that is the motor of the whole history of philosophy, as it is showed in *L'étonnement philosophique*. Rather than to stress the fact that we sail on open sea, taken by the nausea, continually risking the shipwreck, Hersch prefers to see, in the renunciation to possess the pure being, the occasion to keep in dialogue with it, showing a pity towards the world that has characterised other famous women of the twentieth century, like Arendt, Stein, Weil and Zambrano. This is due to the realist origin of Hersch's existentialism: many existentialist philosophers found their philosophy on *nothingness*, as Sartre would say, whereas the Genevan is always sustained by the hard core of the natural datum, which is an indispensable indication both as the inner law that gives an initial direction and as the matter in which to engrave existence. Hersch's existential progress does not go from the empty nothingness to the total fullness, but rather from the least determined world to the most determined one, as it is clarified in her frequent collisions with Sartre.

In conclusion, I would define Hersch as the *gesture of existentialism*. Thanks to the realist demand that comes from Bergson, the Genevean has taken the strong theoretical existentialist

tradition of whom has preceded her and, elaborating an original version of it, she has tried to convert it in a practice with poiethical effects. In this way, besides the example that every great philosopher's simple gesture leaves to posterity as a proof of existential freedom, she has left a second, even more important, example: the attention to how existential freedom must be declined in ontological freedom, in the subjective life of every day, and responsible freedom, in the intersubjective experience of the world. In her inaugural lesson of the winter semester of 1956, *Le métier de philosophe*, Hersch explains that philosophy is a reflexive activity that leads to a practice after itself, confirming what she says in *L'illusion philosophique*: "Sometimes it seems that philosophy through itself drives you out of itself, towards life, towards action, or towards science, or art, or religion. Sometimes it seems that the essential experience is only possible outside philosophy, when you stop talking about it" (Hersch, 1957, 6).

This is the teaching that better reflects Hersch's heritage, a contribution that once more is composed of *theoria* and *poiesis*, *freedom* and *nature*. This contribution gives a well-defined form to freedom. On the one side, this means that it has some clear limits and many aspects of the Herschian path deserve to be developed or reconsidered, because Hersch left them out or she addressed them from an unsystematic point of view. In particular, an analysis of the role of the other in the construction of the personal identity of the subject is missing in her path and, in this sense, Hersch's philosophy seems to be a paradigm on the free act rather than a philosophy on freedom from an existential point of view. On the other side, such limited paradigm is still a real result full of practical examples and references, and it is important to point out once again that this is possible only thanks to the dialectics between freedom and nature that animates Hersch's path, because freedom involves the reflection on meaning and nature involves the relevance of reality, leading to a philosophy that always tries to exist, incarnating the subjective meaning in the world. Such limited paradigm can only be the result of a realist existentialism and it constitutes a good matter that shows the possibilities of existentialism. Future philosophers can hold such matter to give a better determination to it through their forms, to work for a freer world to contemporary men.

Endnotes:

1. "It is in this sense that for Jeanne Hersch *miming* means trying to think 'subjectively with the author', reconstructing step by step the path and the act that led him to the elaboration of his system. [...] In the *mimesis* there is a repetition by difference, a repetition that involves a change inside the subject because what is repeated is crossed by himself. One must not confuse the gesture of miming with the pure and simple imitation or repetition, since the mimic act is first of all an internal exercise of getting the gesture of freedom which is at the basis of every theoretical construction" (Tarantino, 2008, 72-73). All the passages cited in this work are my translations, because there is no English translation of the texts quoted in this paper.
2. In *Eclairer l'obscur: entretiens avec Gabrielle et Alfred Dufour*, Hersch admits that she has found the real nature of philosophy in Jaspers: "G.D.K. – This first meeting and this first seminary have played a role in your decision of devoting yourself to philosophy? J.H. – A decisive role. Listening to Jaspers, I discovered that philosophy was there" (Hersch, Dufour, Dufour, 2006, 25).
3. After reflecting on Heidegger's trust in Hitler, Hersch sums up her thought in few words: "I think that in Heidegger's philosophy there are some elements that lend themselves to every type of compromise. It leads to a

- more or less magic pathetic element that is a factor of irresponsibility. [...] The ideas that he developed in front of us, he did not submit them to our free judgement as the liberal attitude of philosophy asks for; he imposed them. There is an enchanting aspect in his philosophy” (Hersch, Dufour, Dufour, 2006, 29).
4. “The lived world and the reasoned world did not remain separated by a thick wall. Bergson himself uses images to think, to transpose from one world to another certain relationships that clearly exist and that we grasp thanks to experience, to reach a clear and expressible inner representation” (Hersch, 2001, 135).
 5. See Meccariello, 2009.
 6. “According to Hersch, the way Bergson deals with the problem of freedom is not moral. [...] It drifts into determinism. In Bergson, free action is not a decision, but simply the affirmation of the natural development of our being [...] – there is no choice to be made between different alternatives, there is no conflict of wills, there are no fractures, separations” (De Vecchi, 2008, 28).
 7. De Muralt perfectly sums up these passages from *L’illusion philosophique*: “In this objective intention of the philosopher, his way of being-in-the-world, his first attitude in the face of reality, and in order to resume a familiar expression of existentialism, his original existence, are realised and manifested. [...] It is this subjectivity that matters to know, through the cipher that manifests it indirectly, in its profound truth: subjective truth, says Jeanne Hersch, [...] metaphysical truth, she says more willingly” (De Muralt, 1966, 106-107). After a few pages, he concludes: “Philosophy is essentially neither objective knowledge, nor assured certainty, nor perfect expression: it is rather subjective truth in front of the real, it is engagement in the world and faithfulness of the inner mime that proves the becoming of man” (De Muralt, 196, 111).
 8. Hersch does not give a precise definition of *existential freedom* but, since this freedom is the basis of her whole thought, its meaning becomes clearer while reading all the other contributions in which she speaks of this space to be preserved for the authentic dialogue with what is essential for a subject. Christoff explains very well why *L’illusion philosophique* is important for *existential freedom*, as a justification of what Hersch will do in her life and with her philosophy: “The illusion denounced with audacity and freshness consists, to sum up, in considering the philosophical research related to an object and to the intellectual treatment of it, while the truth of philosophy is one thing with the commitment of the reasoning, with the practice, with the attitude of the philosopher, with a ‘gesture’ that one can ‘mime’. [...] This limit redirects the consciousness to the freedom of its existence escaped from the net of the causes. Philosophy is then the struggle for being sure of the freedom of the existence of this ‘possible consciousness’, an absolutely one truth. So the teaching of philosophy is not the transmission of a knowledge about objects, but a *process of awakening*” (Christoff, 2000, 306-307). Chello goes in the same direction: “The question that ends the book – ‘*Will philosophy get out of the alley to which reduced itself?*’ (p. 143) – is just apparently without an answer, since identifying the fundamental illusion of philosophy undoes only one type of making philosophy. [...] It is in this impossibility that Hersch identifies that empty space, which is the space of being and so, since she is not nihilist, a space in which is revealed not the essence, but the potential presence, that becomes freedom. Namely the constant research of being, a research which is fallacious from the beginning, if one reflects in terms of reaching a result, [...] but philosophy is that path that lets the articulation of that clue, which remembers the division between being and existence” (Chello, 2007, 75).
 9. The letter is kept in *Nachl. J. Hersch 1.2* at Zentralbibliothek in Zurich.
 10. Piguet gives a clear explanation of these passages: “Reality is neither the divine and the absolute, nor the human and the relative considered in isolation, but a compromise among the two. Or better: a *mix-up*. This mix-up, is called by J. Hersch *form*. Let us explain better: man is there, in front of the unknown: he opens his eyes and he wants to know these things in-themselves, trying to eliminate himself just for reaching this goal. But he does not manage to eliminate himself: he wanted an object that should be ‘pure object’, he wanted something ‘in-itself’; he has obtained only a ‘object-for-the-subject’, a form. [...] Something has escaped him – J. Hersch says: the *matter*. He wanted “to hold”, but his *hold* bumped into an impregnable matter. Form is the result of this conflict; it is a mix-up between the hold and the matter” (Piguet, 2000, 54-55).
 11. See Hersch, 1942.
 12. Explaining the title of this work, Hersch identifies the human act of giving form in the capability to conceive the matter as a *singular* in which to find freely a subjective reference to transcendence: “What is this authority of the singular? What ontological weight does it have, then? I would call here “transcendence” the essential irreducibility of an object, that is, what in its essence remains *proposed* to the spirit *without being possessed* by it, without ever being able to be exhausted by it” (Hersch, 1950, 46).

13. "It is when one tries to know what the lived inner freedom is, that the problem of the distinction between freedom and arbitrariness arises. Some conceive freedom as the possibility of doing what one wants, when one wants, how one wants. [...] We try to understand in what such behavior differs from freedom, and what are the levels of freedom: 1) [...] There is no freedom there – simply a complex set of causes. 2) [...] The lowest level of freedom, called "freedom of indifference". 3) You choose between two possible decisions, one corresponding to a duty, the other to a desire, accepting the consequences of your choice. It is an act of moral freedom. 4) [...] Here freedom joins – despite an apparent paradox – with the deepest need, which is the opposite of determinism: an absolute" (Hersch, 1982, 2-3).
14. De Vecchi is the one that better explains the relation between *existential freedom* and *ontological freedom*: "In *L'être et la forme*, the human being emerges as subject – not the philosophical subject, but the human being subject [...] – actualising his own freedom: exerting a hold on a matter and getting a form from it. So also here, it is about a freedom through which human being actualises his being. But more than on an (absolute) existential freedom, the stress is on the 'ontological function of freedom and of giving form: through it the human being recognises himself as 'a being that knows, that acts, that creates'. This is not an absolute freedom, like the freedom at stake in the existential decision or in the "absolute demand'. [...] The more the subject actualises himself in his acting, the more his hold on the matter is strong and incisive, the more he gives form to his matter, and the more he individualises himself as an acting subject, the more he affirms something absolute of himself" (De Vecchi, 2008, 123-124).
15. Vida gives a good explanation of the role of human rights in *Diritti umani e umanità: a partire da Jeanne Hersch*. She sums up the role of body and freedom in Hersch's reflexion on human rights: "Human rights are founded on a specific conception of human nature that is founded on the fusion among the thesis on freedom (the capacity of freedom as an essential property of human being) with the thesis that man is nature and soul at the same time" (Vida, 2012, 14).
16. "The theoretical analysis of Kant and Machiavelli reflects in a pure form the two essential components of the political reality: morality and success" (Hersch, 1956, 102).
17. In her speech *La ménagère de la rive gauche. Théorie politique et idéologie d'après Jeanne Hersch*, De Monticelli defines such practical antinomy as the *political bitterness* of the awareness that there is no power without the ability to exercise freedom and there is no freedom without power as an ability to act.
18. "Freedom is not a thing, it is ambiguous and is not enough for itself. In the political sense, it is only the guarantee that preserve an empty space, - the possibles of a concrete subject. In the philosophical or moral sense, it is a fullness of presence that is lived only for instants, always proposed, [...] never possessed. [...] It is not its own goal, although it is the goal of every political action made for the human in man. This empty space that politics must preserve, this empty space that gives their meaning to Laws, to Parliaments, to Justice" (Hersch, *Ideologies*, 118). And again, after few pages: "We use the same word *freedom* in two totally different senses. In the philosophical sense, freedom designates what is the most impossible thing and at the same time the most hardcore thing in the human experience: the presence of a subject that acts on what is not himself for transforming it, giving a meaning and a value to it. [...] We bump here into a political freedom. In itself, it is nothing. Nothing more than a space opened to the soul. [...] It is not properly freedom, but only the possibility of a free presence" (Hersch, 1956, 164).
19. Hersch affirms this in different contributions about human rights, especially in *Les droits de l'homme du point de vue philosophique*, but Giacomo Costa gives a perfect explanation of what Hersch means in *Jeanne Hersch's "detour philosophique" round the rights of man*.
20. "The 'equal rights for all', the fundamental slogan of democracy, expresses nothing but this. [...] They embody on the political level a metaphysical irreducibility and they tend to allow, in some way, the life of the absolute while simultaneously admitting the infinite attempt of conquest and the right of freedom to rejection or rebellion. 'Equal rights for all' are therefore not, in themselves, something that is evident or perfect. They are a fallback, taking into account three fundamental factors of the human condition: the unresolved tension of freedom and the absolute, the absence of an objectively and unquestionably designated elite, the existence of evil in man and the risks that this evil entails in the exercise of power" (Hersch, 1956, 115).
21. "It is interesting that Jeanne Hersch defines the foundation of human rights as a 'fundamental exigence' and that she connotes it as a 'feeling'. Where do these expressions come from? From Kant through the interpretation of Jaspers. Better explained, with 'absolute exigence' Jeanne Hersch translates the expression '*unbedingte Anspruch*' with which Jaspers in his book on *Kant* designates the Kantian categorical imperative.

Moreover, Jeanne Hersch, when translating with 'I feel' – the 'erfabre' of Jaspers, she emphasises the emotional sense of 'erfabren' that means at the same time knowing, experiencing, and feeling, suffering: the absolute exigence for Jeanne Hersch is an experience of the subject, it is an experiencing, and feeling, suffering: the absolute exigence for Jeanne Hersch is an experience of the subject, it is an affective event that he lives. [...] The human being has an unconditional need to be recognised by others in his being free and therefore human" (De Vecchi, 2008, 230-231).

22. *Responsible freedom* is present in many Hersch's contribution on human rights, but there is a passage of *Les droits de l'homme du point de vue philosophique* that seems to be essential: "Being [man] 'a soul and a body', he lives his humanity just at the intersection of the one and the other. The reality of nature, of factual data, takes a decisive importance, and makes him live *for...* He proposes some goals to himself. *He wants, he desires, he opts, he choses.* He is and he wants himself *a responsible freedom.* In this way, he introduces *some rights*, and the *right*, in the world of empirical realities, while introducing also the dimentions of *the goal, the finality and the history*" (Hersch, 1993 2, 506).
23. Hersch quotes these two principles many times in her contributions about human rights, even if she has never given a precise or comprehensive definition of them, but the clearest quotes and examples can be found in *Les droits de l'homme du point de vue philosophique*.
24. See Pastore, 2014.
25. See De Vecchi, 2008.

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