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Existentialism and Christian Faith

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ARISING young film star who has been publicized as an "Existentialist Pin-up" was recently asked by an interviewer to explain what the word implies. Her reply, while somewhat cryptic, did get to the root of the matter: "Whatever you do, you become." While it is far from adequate as a definition, this is a good starting point for understanding existentialism, which puts its primary emphasis upon the freedom and responsibility of the individual to determine, within limits, his own destiny and character. Jean-Paul Sartre expresses the same principle dramatically in the mouth of Garcin, one of the characters in his play *No Exit*: "A man is what he wills himself to be." And he puts it more philosophically in his essay *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme*: "Man makes himself. He isn't ready made at the start. In choosing his ethics he makes himself, and force of circumstances is such that he can not abstain from choosing one."¹

Perhaps we shall understand the significance of this emphasis in existentialism if we consider it in relation to three areas of human thought and life in which individuality and responsibility are apt to be minimized or threatened.

1. PHILOSOPHY

Modern existentialism began with Kierkegaard's revolt against Hegelian idealism which, he maintained, reduced the individual to a mere aspect of universal history, relieving him of serious responsibility and treating every decisive issue as a matter capable of resolution by abstract thought. Instead of acknowledging that human life consists of frequent choices between alternatives which cannot be logically understood (either/or), idealism sought and claimed to find a method by which all events could be seen to fit into a pattern of reason (both/and). Existentialism declares that truth is to be found in the unique *existence* of each man engaged in living, despite its uncertainties and incongruities, not in the study of *essence* from which all the historical complexities and richness of life have been stripped off. As against all philosophies, from Plato on, which begin from general concepts and absolute ideas, and which consequently find the temporal material world embarrassing and "unreal," existentialism affirms that we must accept the given world with all its problems and limitations as the starting-point of thought. Man must be treated as the unique *person* he is and not reduced to an *object* of thought; he is free and cannot be treated as part of a system or process the character or future of which can be intellectually explained or anticipated.

1. E. T. by Bernard Frechtman, published under the title *Existentialism* (New York, 1947), p. 51.

Man cannot be simply and finally brought under and identified with any law, whether it be promulgated as the law of his nature or as the law of the universe; the rule cannot justify the act nor the person, for only the act justifies the rule, as the painter not the school justifies the painter . . . man cannot be man and be bound, even by himself, and the world is open and cannot be circumvallated by universals and kept snug and safe.²

This does not simply mean that existentialism begins from a different philosophical *a priori*; it involves a radically different philosophical method. "Existentialism is an attempt at philosophizing from the standpoint of the actor, instead of, as has been customary, from that of the spectator."³ The Christian Kierkegaard has this in common with the atheist Nietzsche. "Truth is subjectivity," says Kierkegaard. Nietzsche says, "It makes the most material difference whether a thinker stands personally related to his problems, having his fate, his need and even his highest happiness therein; or merely impersonally, that is to say, if he can only feel and grasp them with the tentacles of cold prying thought."⁴

Existentialists have inevitably been accused of irrationality, because they have thus rejected the traditional assumption of philosophy that by rational analysis we can "make sense" of all experience and reduce the mysterious and the peculiar to order and generality. But they may rightly claim that true reason involves taking into account all the facts of human experience, including the irreducible fact of freedom. Nor have existentialists as a whole proved antagonistic to thought and reflection as such. Jaspers, Marcel and Heidegger have each in different ways attempted an intellectual analysis of the existentialist position. Their purpose, however, is not the construction of rational edifices such as those of Aristotle or Aquinas but "reflection upon intensely lived experience." In this, surely, the existentialist is recalling to us a basically Biblical and Christian position. We might say that John 7:17 would serve as a text for the existentialist approach to knowledge and truth: "If any man willeth to do his will he shall know of the doctrine, whether it is of God." For the Bible does not present us with a philosophical or theological system, but with certain unique events as the self-revelation of God; and it calls us to a response of faith which involves decision, trust and risk. Kierkegaard was surely right in his attack on any system—even "Christendom"—which reduces faith to assent, domesticates God, and claims to offer to man objective evidences sufficient to prove the truth. The Christian must be prepared to believe even when he is "out upon the seventy thousand fathoms of water."

2. SCIENCE

One general tendency in scientific thought has been that of explaining, or trying to explain, the phenomenon of human personality in terms of the

2. H. J. Blackham, *Six Existentialist Thinkers*, pp. 159-160.

3. E. L. Allen, *Existentialism from Within*, p. 3.

4. Quoted by Blackham, *op. cit.*, pp. 23-24.

physical world. Man is regarded as the end-term in a process of evolution, his thoughts and feelings are regarded as the reflection of physical change, his conscious life is said to be determined by the unconscious over which he has no effective control. In one way or another all these interpretations of man (not, of course, based squarely on objective scientific knowledge but characteristic of the "scientific age") depersonalize him. In contrast existentialists emphasize the distinctions between the human person and the world of nature. The latter is ruled by predetermined principles and is incapable of free choices; the former has freedom and responsibility and can rightly use the natural world for his purposes. Man is subject, the world is object.⁵ Sartre regards Freud's determinism as one of the worst examples of the depersonalization of man, for in thinking of himself as bound by the unconscious the individual is able to excuse his failures and to avoid the full responsibility for his choices. We think of ourselves as cowardly not because we have made cowardly choices but because we were conditioned to this by unwise treatment in infancy. But the existentialist says that "the coward makes himself cowardly, [that] the hero makes himself heroic. There's always a possibility for the coward not to be cowardly any more and for the hero to stop being heroic."⁶ Once again, the Christian must surely welcome any movement which reaffirms the uniqueness and responsibility of man over against a naturalistic determinism.

3. SOCIETY

The existentialists have also drawn attention to the widespread tendency of modern social life to reduce the individual to a mere number or "hand" or "unit." Marcel points out how easily people are identified with their functions. A man is not primarily a human person with all the richness and diversity of personality; he is a railwayman, a civil servant, a schoolmaster—and all his other activities are treated as aspects of this abstract definition. Even when he retires he is regarded in terms of his function—a retired doctor, civil servant, etc. The effect of all this is to encourage the individual to hide behind generalizations and to abdicate his proper responsibilities. He thinks of himself as one of the crowd, part of mankind, absorbed in "the public." He excuses himself from the exercise of his unique freedom because "it's human nature" to do this or that, because "everybody does it." He thus ceases to be a human person and falls back into the sub-human world; he becomes a thing.

5. Some existentialists (e.g., Heidegger) can certainly be criticized for speaking as if the natural world were *merely* instrumental to man's purpose, and it is a weakness of Christian existentialists (e.g., Bultmann) that they tend to ignore the place of the created order in the redemptive purpose of God (Romans 8:19-23). See the comments of Ernst Lohmeyer in *Kerygma and Myth*, ed. Bartsch, pp. 128, 133.

6. Sartre, *op. cit.*, pp. 41-42. This raises an important question as to Sartre's consistency. My colleague Dr. Alden D. Kelley points out to me that it could well be argued, on the basis of some passages in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* that he has merely replaced the psychological determinism of Freud by a determinism according to which all our choices are conditioned by past choices.

Existentialists recognize that the majority of people live in this way, in what Heidegger calls "fallenness" or "inauthentic existence," and they regard it as their task to awaken them to the truth, to challenge them to "authentic existence." This explains in part the gloomy and almost nauseating picture of human life which so many of Sartre's plays present to us. They are not intended to be a representation of life as it should be but as (in the existentialist view) it actually is, in order that the observer may be shocked into recognizing the futility and inadequacy of a less than fully responsible existence. This dramatic procedure undoubtedly involves a certain distortion and exaggeration. Very few living people are altogether as debased as some of Sartre's characters, and he gives some justification to the popular impression that existentialism is "a clandestine wedding of nordic melancholy with Parisian pornography."⁷ Moreover Sartre and other existentialists can rightly be criticized for minimizing the positive and healthy elements in human life—birth, children, love. But they would claim that it is only by isolating one side of the truth that people can be shaken into action and redeemed from inauthentic to authentic existence. And the Christian can take heart from the fact that secular thought is again coming to recognize, even though imperfectly, the truth of the doctrine of the fall. Indeed one reviewer has described the latest book by Albert Camus⁸ as "a contemporary version of the third chapter of Genesis."

The existentialist does not only believe in sin, however. He believes also in redemption. There is hope for man because even in the depths of his dehumanization and bondage he retains an awareness of the authentic existence which is his right and privilege, and his "conscience" will not allow him altogether to ignore the radical defects of his present life.

It is at this point, however, that the existentialists, at least the non-Christian existentialists,⁹ depart most radically from the Christian view of man. "Man's destiny is within himself," says Sartre.¹⁰ Freedom is within the capacity of man if he will choose it, quite apart from any act of divine grace or redemption. This optimism about man must not be confused with the liberal or even the Marxist view of history or mankind as self-redeeming. All such ideas subordinate the individual to the race or to the class or to history and justify man only in the mass. The existentialist affirms, paradoxically, that it is only when the individual comes to terms with the certain fact of his extinction in death and the ultimate meaninglessness of his life that he finds freedom. When he gives up seeking for exterior justifications

7. Carl Michalson, *Christianity and the Existentialists* (New York, 1956), p. 2.

8. *The Fall*. See *Theology Today*, July, 1957, pp. 259-260.

9. In this paper, which is intended to serve as a general introduction to the subject, no attempt has been made to distinguish in detail among different writers to whom the title "existentialist" has been applied, sometimes (as in the case of Marcel) without their approval. The differences between them are considerable and important, but it is the contention of this paper that there remains a distinct and definable "existentialist" approach to life and thought. See Frederick Copleston, S.J., *Contemporary Philosophy* (London, 1956), pp. 125-126.

10. *Op. cit.*, p. 42.

of his individuality in terms of the future of humanity or of the Church he can begin to live. When he chooses to live and act (rather than to commit suicide) *even though life has no meaning* he can exercise his freedom responsibly. Sartre has said, "We were never so free as in the Resistance"—a time when by all normal standards life was strictly circumscribed. What he means is that in the French "underground" life was lived in the present without either hope or fear for what the next day might bring, and therefore men lived and died without the normal restraints of tradition, morality or prudence. "Authentic personal existence is a synthesis of the imposed and the willed, and the synthesis is achieved by taking up the imposed into the willed: I will my own past and the world as it is given in the immediate circumstances and in its ultimate interpretation, and with my will self-determined in this way I choose from the possibilities which remain open."¹¹

The word used in Danish and German for the sense of ultimate meaninglessness, the acknowledgment of which sets man free, can best be translated "dread." It represents the serious and honest facing of what most people hide from themselves—the fact that human life comes up against "a fundamental metaphysical insecurity; not dread of anything in particular, but the dread which comes over us if we realize that in the last resort the moral and theoretical props by which we have supported ourselves go down, and we are faced with—*Nothingness*."¹² For the Christian this recognition that all human activity and thought and pleasure are in themselves transitory and empty corresponds to the religious confession, "Our hearts are restless till they find their rest in Thee," and is to be welcomed. At least the existentialists have come to a point beyond the self-satisfied liberal optimism of the pre-war period; but, unhappily, for many of them the theistic solution to man's sense of insecurity is excluded because they will not accept the ultimate limitation of human independence which is involved in belief in God. There are, however, indications that existentialism may not be so closed to a religious solution as some of its exponents affirm. Sartre does indeed claim that "existentialism is nothing else than an attempt to draw all the consequences of a coherent atheistic position" and asserts that "even if God did exist, that would change nothing."¹³ But on the other hand there may be more possibility of openness to the Gospel in a scheme of thought which denies the relevance of God than in one which gives a man a false God, whether Marxist or humanist.

Existentialism does not put Jesus in the manger or Christ on the middle Cross, but it will put nothing else there either. This is its Christian advantage over such religious philosophies as Stoicism, which with all its pious language and self-sufficient world-view in almost every detail rendered the Christian faith superfluous. . . . Existentialism nurses an aching void, keeps the wounds of man

11. Blackham, *op. cit.*, pp. 98–99, summarizing Heidegger.

12. Dorothy Emmet in the *Supplement to the Christian News-Letter*, October 1st, 1947, p. 11.

13. *Op. cit.*, pp. 60–61.

open until an authentically healing agent can be applied . . . sponsors what the poet Holderlin called "a holy emptiness" which turns its atheism into a wistful stretching out for reality¹⁴.

The fact that existentialism points beyond its own categories is expressly recognized by Jaspers who, although rejecting the authoritative answers of Christian doctrine, criticizes positivism for its denial of the transcendent. Many readers of Heidegger maintain that, despite himself, his thought implies a religious solution. And, of course, such writers as Gabriel Marcel and Paul Tillich have shown that many basic existentialist insights can be used to illuminate the Christian understanding of man. But it remains true that the most notable exponents of this philosophy, even when they come close to Christian truth in their *diagnosis* of man's ills depart radically from it in their prescription for their *cure*. Both Sartre and Heidegger, for example (while they differ as to whether death is the fulfilment or negation of life) agree that the fact of death must be taken seriously. To live in the face of inevitable death is to be set free from the pursuit of earthly possessions and from the tyranny of public opinion; it means to be delivered from false hopes and fears and makes possible a real life in freedom. There is a profound Christian truth in this, for St. Paul argues in Romans 6 that the Christian is set free to live unto God because he has been identified with Christ in a death to sin. But the non-Christian existentialist parts company with St. Paul not only in rejecting the hope of resurrection as unrealistic but even more fundamentally in rejecting the whole idea of Christ as the embodiment and saviour of mankind. No other person can really make any difference to my individual situation. There is no such thing as "human nature" in the mind of God because if there were it would delimit my individual freedom; there cannot be any salvation of mankind in Christ because each individual is self-determined.¹⁵ Man is his own creator and must be his own saviour. Thus when existentialism in its secular form is laid bare it is seen to offer no gospel to man living his inauthentic existence. We may, and should, welcome and make use of many existentialist insights but we must recognize that unbaptized into Christ it represents "man's extreme effort in the direction of self-sufficiency, his ultimate striving to rise above the void into which he is thrown . . . despairing man's last endeavour to be superior to his destiny."¹⁶

14. Michalson, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-22.

15. The excessive individualism of many existentialists has often been noted. Dorothy Emmet in the *Supplement* to the *C.N.-L.* quoted above remarks that "they sometimes use language which suggests that it does not much matter what you choose, so long as you have the courage to choose and not to rat on it" (p. 14). But this implies a complete indifference to the interests and demands of family, nation, etc.

16. John MacQuarrie, *An Existentialist Theology*, p. 195. MacQuarrie is speaking of Heidegger in particular, but his words are applicable to many others.