

THE MEANING OF EXISTENTIALISM

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THERE is a deep cleavage in modern consciousness, which extends throughout Western civilization. The unresolved dualism in our collective life is reflected in the state of civil war that reigns in our mind. On the one hand, we strive after material progress and believe in a mechanistic interpretation of the Universe. There is no serious attempt to fathom the meaning of the mystery that lurks at the heart of life, and death is merely an abrupt and painful termination of existence, something to be avoided at all costs. On the other hand, there has been of late a portentous intensification of the inner life of man, a spiritual awareness that constitutes an ironic commentary of rejection even if only by implication, of all that the dominant materialistic ethos affirms.

There is, to begin with, the growing knowledge of the dynamic unconscious, with its proliferating swarm of irrational impulses, its blind instinctual compulsions, its anxieties and phobias and neurotic temptations. All this heightens our perception of the power of the irrational. There is more between heaven and earth and in the mind of man than is included in the formulations of scientific determinism. This has caused a widespread revolt against the scientific method. The tendency has been to turn inward, to examine with almost morbid scrupulosity the fugitive, chequered currents of the self. Subjectivity, in all its rich and astonishing mutations, has become the subject of minute investigations. Depth-psychology has tended to undermine the absolutism of logic, the appeal of rationalism, the systems fathered by abstract metaphysics. For the concrete person, in his day-to-day existence, in his decisions and in his conduct, is not moved by such arbitrary, thin-spun categories of thought. To assume that he is, is to destroy his "reality." Hence the challenging belief of the Existentialists that existence is prior to essence. Hamlet has become the contemporary hero, the symbol of our desperate search for a principle of faith and a mode of affirmative action. An obsessive preoccupation with subjectivity has reached a point where the lines of demarcation between normality and abnormality have

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become thoroughly blurred. We can today speak with some degree of justification of the neurotic character as approximating a universal type.

Now the neurotic personality is marked by instability. Without apparent cause it may suddenly become depressed or tired, angry, melancholy, morbid. The neurotic has no control over these unbidden moods that take possession of him. To his dismay he learns that he is not master in his own home. He finally reaches a stage where he is incapacitated from taking any positive, constructive action. He not only feels inhibited, spiritually paralyzed; he has no purpose to live for. This wasteful and devastating splitting of the personality is caused in the main by the kind of culture we live in. As Karen Horney points out in *Our Inner Conflicts*: "Man has become to so great a degree merely a cog in an intricate social system that alienation from the self is almost universal, and human values themselves have declined."

All this represents a significant revolt against the hegemony of the rational intellect. The evidence for this uprising is present in such abundance that it is difficult to know which examples to select as offering a convincing illustration. D. H. Lawrence passionately affirmed the necessity for "universe-building," by which he meant the enthronement of vital fictions, the creative release of poetic intuitions, without regard for the objective, analytic methods of science. In perhaps no other writer of our time has the rejection of logic, science, and intellectualism run to such violent extremes. In addition, there is the current re-discovery of mythical thinking, a revival of interest in the archetypal images that Jung has described in his various books, the espousal of mysticism by writers like Aldous Huxley and Christopher Isherwood, the reaffirmation of the religious attitude. But the boldest assault on the citadel of reason was launched by the Existentialists.

However "disreputable" Existentialism may appear as a logically organized system of philosophy, its effort to effect a transvaluation of values, to determine the relation of the individual to himself and to the universe, is of tremendous psychological and cultural significance. At the heart of the Existentialist doctrine is the belief that man makes himself; therein lies his essential freedom. Therefore, nothing is finished, final, irretrievable. Existentialism thus dramatically exhibits the motif of "conversion," the refurbished myth of *rebirth*. Its pessimism, its relentless confrontation of the pain and perversions, the

horror and cruelty of existence, is for the purpose of stripping away all consolatory illusions. It is a fundamental mistake, however, to label every work of literature (Coline, for example) that portrays life as a howling nightmare in the void as Existentialist in content.

Paradoxically enough, the Existentialists derive their strength from their very paroxysms of despair. They have made the discovery that life is without purpose or meaning. They have come to the conclusion that the cosmos is sublimely indifferent to the fate of man, his suffering, his aspirations, his ideals. Whether he lives or dies, whether he endures agony or enjoys happiness is of no concern to the starry heavens. Man is alone in the universe, and there is no one to help him. But if that is so, then man is free, since no supernatural power can interfere in the management of his life. Man is his own God, dependent on his own volition. His finitude is the cross he must bear and the means of his emancipation, for he can now contemplate his own non-existence with existentialist fortitude.

The Kierkegaardian Existentialists, however, embrace Christianity as salvation, although they know that faith thus achieved runs counter to the logic of the practical world and cannot be ratified by reason. Precisely because such faith is absurd and logically indefensible it is to be accepted. All that the Existentialist knows is that he finds himself in an always precarious situation about which he is concerned; for him, therefore, it is instinct with meaning; the experience is the meaning. Existentialism reveals how man arrives at the knowledge of non-being, his realization that life is finite, his discovery that death rounds out the whole. Hence life is decisively influenced by death, and this sense of non-being adds not only poignancy but meaning to existence. By accepting the finality of extinction and the knowledge that all man sets for himself as a goal is destined to fail, Existentialism achieves a tragic grandeur. It is a characteristic philosophy of an age in which practically all the certitudes and consolations of the past have lost their efficacy.

Existentialism is a philosophy of nihilism solemnly dedicated to the proposition that man is doomed but not damned. The distinction is important. If man were damned, he would be suffering from a sense of inexpiable guilt, a feeling of sin, and thus by implication there would be standards to conform to, ideals to strive for, just as hell, by the law of polarity, presupposes the existence of heaven. The Existentialists make an

end of all such metaphysical illusions. There is neither heaven nor hell, neither guilt nor sin. Man is doomed in a universe that is alien to his purpose, indifferent to his deepest needs. The one thing neither God nor Nature can take away from him is his freedom of choice, and if he exercises that he need not be tormented by the furies of remorse. If he drains the cup of despair to the lees, he will experience the joy of freedom. His doom, in short, is his grandeur; his misery is the condition of his redemption. Existentialism, like Dada but on a much higher plane, expresses the alienation of modern man, his spiritually orphaned state, his incapacity to make any heartening affirmation.

Existentialism has, of course, its philosophical antecedents, just as it has psychological roots and social motivation. It is the articulated philosophy of anxiety and of death. It is largely taken up with the distressing but also liberating fact of death: our own death. There is no set date for our demise, no dramatically appropriate last act on which the curtain falls. What must be firmly grasped is that death may strike at any moment. That is the knowledge we frantically seek to escape. However, it is only those who comprehend not only the inevitability of death but also its possibility at any moment, here and now, who are lifted above the routine of the commonplace and achieve wholeness of vision, true selfhood. Thus Existentialism springs in part from an obsessed awareness of the ubiquity of death.

Existentialism is further proof of the problematical character of our age. Modern literature suffers from many of the major symptoms of alienation. The Existentialist belief that there is nothing above or beyond man induces a crisis, since if this is so then man stands alone in the universe, forced to bear the terror of the infinite and the paradox of human freedom. The ruins of the smashed house of logic litter the contemporary scene. If some modern writers turn to Kierkegaard, it is because they find in him their own agony of doubt, their crisis of conscience, their subjective dread. This is the age of the irrational leap. What variations Kierkegaard plays upon the term "nothing" as he contrasts it with "something," or as he describes the different kinds and degrees of nothing on which the eye of dread is hypnotically focused! He does not argue or preach; he works creatively, frankly exposing the barrenness of his soul, the futility of abstract thought, the meaninglessness of life. Finally it came to him that faith was mistaken if it clung to this life, that it could not be achieved by pride of intellect

but only by virtue of reliance upon the absurd. To the consciousness of the normal man faith held under such conditions seems the height of absurdity, but that is precisely the *sine qua non* of faith. The ways of God are beyond human comprehension. Just when man despairs and is prepared to give up the struggle, that is when he wins the supreme victory, for he then ceases to depend on the power of reason. Faith is a hazard, a process of becoming, a gratuitous gift. "It is impossible," declares Kierkegaard, "to live artistically before one has made up one's mind to abandon hope; for hope precludes self-limitation."

But the most militant and influential manifestations of contemporary Existentialism stem not from Kierkegaard but from Sartre. Here we have the shift from a profoundly religious orientation to an aggressive atheism, ritualistically celebrating the death of God. Sartre, the leading exponent of French Existentialism, stresses the fact that values are subjective and that they have no reality or sanction outside the one who experiences them. This does away with the need for a Creator. If that is the case, then man again falls into the bottomless pit of despair. The solution, however, lies in not casting about for a religious lifeline but in realizing that there is no solution. It is not surprising that Existentialism has been under attack not only by Roman Catholics, who are shocked by its nihilism, but also by humanistic thinkers, who condemn it as symptomatic of the mental and spiritual decadence of our age. In *Existentialism*, Guido de Ruggiero speaks of Existentialism as a form of metaphysical pornography. Existentialism, however, cannot be disposed of by a fusillade of abuse. It represents a reaction against a rationalism that dabbles in *a priori* principles and generalizations. Rejecting finalism, the Existentialist philosophers are haunted by their vision of the nothingness out of which man emerges and the nothingness to which he returns.

Is it not clear at last that the pride of man, his confidence in his own powers, has been shattered! Though he glories in his possession of the secret of atomic energy, he is well aware that his scientific instruments may finally enslave him and destroy him. There has been a visible collapse of the optimism with which nineteenth-century thinkers faced the future, and the utopian mentality in politics has practically gone out of business. This crisis has spread to religion as well as literature. The theology of crisis has gained considerable strength of late. Some theologians have come to grips with this con-

ception of crisis as inseparable from the life of the spirit. The theology of crisis, accentuating the Existentialism of Kierkegaard maintains that reason is not only fallible but bankrupt. Man must acknowledge the essential irrationality of existence and achieve faith in God by accepting the condition of absurdity. Thus we get a religious synthesis that is poles removed from the Promethean humanism which exalts man to the position of a God. The titanic pride of man is denounced as not only false but fatal, leading humanity to its doom. Only by serving God can the soul neutralize the acids of skepticism and counteract the gravitational pull of individualism and materialistic collectivism.

This theology of crisis, like the Existentialism derived from Kierkegaard, is characterized by a consistent depreciation of human values. Man is but a nothingness; he must plunge into the void if he is to be saved. Christianity has thus come to the cross-roads; its apostles now examine the foundations of their faith as they gaze into the depths of the abyss. What they find in Kierkegaard that constitutes a bond of kinship is his profound perception of the unreality of this world. What they seek is not an abstraction, however logically validated, but a truth which is personal and subjective, a truth which matters deeply to the self: the truth of religion, the truth of God. Out of a vision of shuddering dread they have given birth to a catastrophic variety of Christianity. Every moment is an intersection between two eternities, a leap in the dark; that is the paradox of all existence. Without reason or knowledge, out of a sense of freedom one chooses, and faith emerges. Here, too, we behold the abject humiliation of the intellect.

Existentialism is a distressingly confused philosophy of involvement. Out of nothingness it creates a faith, which is a faith of anguish and despair, for it is based on the recognition that this faith, too, is compounded of nothingness. It exists only because we choose, because we will it to exist. Both forms of Existentialism, Kierkegaard's and Sartre's, recognize the fundamental purposelessness of the universe in relation to man, but whereas Kierkegaard and his disciples make the leap into the void and arrive at a Godhead that invests the world with meaning, and life with purpose, Sartre, far from being disheartened by the condition of humanity trapped in a universe that is alien and meaningless, resolves to make the most of it. If God does not exist, then neither does a fixed, immutable human nature. Man must simply abandon the search for super-

natural sanctions and support outside of himself. Man for himself! If Sartre rejects Marxism, it is because Marxism, deterministic in outlook, portrays man as the conditioned product of his environment. Sartre will have none of this evasion of responsibility. Man must be fully responsible for himself and his action, since he is his own God. Freedom is his God.

In *Existentialism*, Sartre attempts to refute the notion that Existentialism leads to a philosophy of utter futility. For him it is a doctrine that makes human life possible for the first time. What is there discouraging in the announcement that man is at last endowed with the power of choice, that everything is up to him? Judged in this light, Existentialism can be converted into an "optimistic" philosophy of life. Each man shapes his own life. He moves on the stream of time, but he is not simply carried along helplessly by the current: he helps to direct the current, and himself selects the goal.

All Sartre has to offer, however, is a series of glittering generalities. He is strong in denial, but when it comes to affirmation he has nothing to say. Each one of us, we are told, is inescapably caught in the net of his own subjectivity, and the final outcome is a form of nightmarish solipsism. Existentialism offers nothing helpful or constructive. It deals with atomistic, isolated individuals, with Society and Nature hovering like phantom mists in the background. It gives us no sense of the life we live from day-to-day: community of interests, solidarity of purpose, cultural participation, economic cooperation. Though we are situated in a cultural environment, we are supposed to be helplessly alone. We are urged to choose, since we must act somehow, and life is thus said to be essentially creative. Sartre keeps on repeating that man must become involved, but one never knows in what sense this is meant to be taken.

Existentialism is not a philosophy but a *Weltanschauung*: a method for reconciling the contradictions of life. It expresses the *ne plus ultra* of nihilistic despair. Its gesture of stoical courage is deceptive. It is strange, indeed, that it should have attracted so many followers. Why should the proposed solution for our contemporary ills take such a starkly nihilistic turn? Why this masochistic delight in contemplating non-being? Why particularly at this time should the meaning of Kierkegaard's writings become clear to us and gain so many earnest disciples? The answer is that Kierkegaard experienced and expressed an absolute of despair, which strikes a responsive chord in the heart of modern man. But whereas Kierkegaard,

like Pascal, could make the leap beyond the abyss of despair and achieve faith in the teeth of logic, modern man beholds the darkness of doubt and the terror of extinction.

Existentialism points to an acute pathological infection in our culture. The symptoms have been there all the time; they have simply come to a head at present. What is to be done? Name-calling will not solve the problem. Men are determined to face the condition of their existence on earth, the emptiness and impotence of their spiritual state. There is no god but man, yet the Existentialists find it extremely difficult to believe in him. They do their best, however, to create some sort of secular "religion" that will guide man on his dark journey to the end of night. There is nothing prescriptive about this religion. Each man makes his own decisions, carves his own ten commandments, knowing that he cannot escape this necessity of freedom. Such a spurious system of metaphysics obviously lends itself to malicious caricature, but all this does not in the least alter the fact that contemporary man faces an appalling crisis of the spirit. Cut off from God and the Absolute, deprived of the support of ethical as well as supernatural sanctions, rejecting the cult of sin and the laws of conscience, he must still endeavor to shape the substance of his life, wrest some order and significance out of the chaos of his impulses, affirm life and fulfill his nature in the face of the death that forever stalks him. The only way to escape Existentialism, as Professor Norberto Robbio points out in *The Philosophy of Decadentism*, is to come to grips with it. This philosophy is a challenge to all of us precisely because it reflects the spiritual crisis of our time. Man has always in some measure been confronted with this tragic situation, only he has not resolved it in the same uncompromisingly negative way, and he will not consent to do so now. Sartre's concept of freedom is the shadow of an idea, abstract, rootless. It is freedom spiritualized into an ineffectual myth, without historical significance or social consequences. A reaction against the standardizing effect of modern collectivism, Existentialism recommends a form of salvation that is decadent because it accentuates man's singularity and aloneness.

Like Byronic romanticism, with which it has much in common Existentialism is doomed. The arguments against it are simple and conclusive. A philosophy of death rather than life, Existentialism cannot be made to work. The tragic sense of life is exhilarating and, in the end, affirmative. The Existentialist position, compounded of negation and despair, is a

species of psychological nihilism that does not believe in its own negations. Even the freedom it exalts is spurious, since it is not grounded in social reality. For man cannot be free in utopian isolation, cut off from the rest of mankind.

Nor is it true that man is inescapably and eternally alone. His specific "nature," rooted in cultural soil, is shaped in its response by the society of which it is an integral part. The sense of aloneness, the feeling of alienation, is born of a particular culture at a particular time. When the involvement of man in the life of society fails to satisfy his deep-seated need for community of purpose and constructive participation, he begins to suffer a sense of frustration, futility, and neurotic isolation. Existentialism is representative of our age in that it voices so poignantly the anxiety from which modern man suffers. The present is hideous and unbearable because it seems an end in itself. The fact of war has made man aware of the abyss into which he may plunge at the next moment. That is the nightmare of nothingness, out of which the Existentialists make so much metaphysical capital.

Modern man is thus faced with one of two choices: either he succumbs to the present disintegrative flux and in despair resigns himself to his aloneness, the tragic futility and fatality of existence: or he endeavors, even in this cultural impasse, to work out some method of social cooperation whereby life will henceforth be exempt from the horrible scourge of global warfare and the terror of nothingness. The humanist cannot accept a philosophy that encourages the liquidation of reason and the tested scientific method of arriving at objective truths. Through the ages man has struggled to acquire this measure of control over his environment and over himself; that is the power his culture confers upon him. Where *id* was, declared Freud, there shall *ego* be. Even Freud's pessimism did not surrender to the compulsion of the dark primordial instincts. If the Existentialists are sincere in maintaining that man shapes his own life and must therefore assume responsibility for his actions, then they must, if they are to be rational and consistent, agree that man is under the necessity of sharing this responsibility with other men. Cooperation for collectively formulated and desirable ends is the goal, not neurotic withdrawal and schizophrenic isolation. The Byronic hero has had his day. The second part of Faust remains to be enacted.