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# Theology and the Existentialist Viewpoint

G. W. PECK

Few if any movements in philosophy have had more influence upon modern Western theology than that described somewhat loosely as 'existentialism'. One possible reaction to the extent of this influence (indeed to the fact that there has been any influence at all) would be to assert that, as in former times, so again now the sacred treasure of the Gospel has been despoiled by an attempt to encase it within the transient framework of a passing fad in human thought. Yet to react in this way would be to fail to take adequate cognizance of the extent to which there are in fact points of contact between what might be called 'Apostolic Christianity' and the existentialist way of looking at things, which are fundamental to each. It would further be to fail to appreciate that existentialism is for the most part not so much an attempt to construct another philosophical 'world view' destined finally to depart with the age which gave it birth into the gloomy portals of history that is merely past, as it is the expression of a determination to provide in language and through concepts of perennial relevance a realistic analysis of the actual, constitutive characteristics of the human situation. Existentialism proclaims the rediscovery and the reaffirmation of the human individual, and of his essential and total involvement in the life which he himself must live and which he shares in common with his fellows. It is concerned, in other words, with a view of man which at its heart is identical with that which has always been one of the primary preoccupations of Christian thought and practice, a view in which man is made to stand out in the starkness of his particularity, in the futility of his finitude, and in the depth of his need to conquer death and attain to the life everlasting.

Nothing brings out this emphasis in existentialism more plainly than a survey of its place in the history of philosophy; and indeed, it must be regarded as doubtful whether any completely adequate comprehension of the full significance of the existentialist viewpoint can be obtained without an initial consideration of the philosophical antecedents against which the movement is historically set. And further, when it comes to be understood in

its historical environment, and grasped as a vital personal and philosophical reaction against one of the most ruthless 'dehumanization' processes of all time, every attempt to characterize its influence upon theology as that of an out-size morsel of secular leaven in an otherwise untainted lump of revelational dough must fall to the ground.<sup>1</sup> For the two will then be seen to be related essentially, and not to have been pressed arbitrarily into an unholy alliance. Because existentialism is what it is historically, and because theology is itself involved in history, the cross fertilization of the one by the other may be taken as having been from the beginning intellectually and spiritually inevitable.

## I

The existentialists, as a recent writer has put it, take their place 'among the diverse and quarrelsome progeny of Kant.' But their origins can best be understood not so much by reference directly to Kant as by reference to some subsequent members of the Kantian family tree, in particular to Hegel and the school of German idealism. Towards the end of his life Kant knew that an interpretation of certain crucial features of his Critical Philosophy was being projected (especially by Fichte) which radically contradicted some of his fundamental assumptions and findings. He expostulated bitterly against his 'so-called friends', but to no avail. He had insisted upon the unquestionable reality of the world given in sense experience, and upon the essential limitation of the range of pure reason, yet he came to be deemed the father of German Absolute Idealism, and upon foundations allegedly laid by him his illegitimate children constructed systems of which he would never have dreamed. Kant had apparently left unresolved certain significant dualisms, and he had ascribed to the understanding a new and striking function in the construction not only of our knowledge of the world but also of the world itself as it is posited in judgment. And whether he approved of it or not on these bases his successors were determined to erect an ultimate metaphysic precisely similar to that which he had pronounced both illusory and vain.

Hegel overcame the dualism which Kant had allegedly left by what was in the end a simple but effective device—unilateral absorption. He proclaimed the unity of thought and being, but it was a unity achieved not so much by mutual agreement as by forceful conquest, thought emerging as the conqueror. Indeed, what actually happened was that being disappeared altogether. Only its name remained. Rejecting the warnings of Kant, Hegel held that there is nothing fundamentally wrong in assuming that, from the very fact that something is being thought, it is being known in itself, and with the distinctive significance of existence

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted also that at least in the case of Kierkegaard the reaction had a distinctively religious aspect as well.

thus disposed of, there was no obstacle in the way of devising a system which included in itself every conceivable thing and event. All problems were solved—God, man, the universe, had become transparent to thought. Everything, even the subtlest manifestations of human experience in art, ethics, and religion, could be allowed for and given their appropriate and logically necessary place in the totality of the Absolute. The problem was, of course, that in so far as the whole process involved at the outset a gigantic abstraction which left actuality out of the picture altogether, it was compelled throughout its course to move wholly in the realm of pure thought. It was in this way that the perpetual over-coming of contradictions in the 'Dialectic' was made possible; for in abstraction there are no real contradictions at all, everything being given at once. Hegel himself seems not to have been aware that so colossal a defect was present in his system—indeed he took pains to protest vigorously against all philosophical thinking which was purely abstract, and maintained that his doctrine was instead the very essence of concreteness. But even this much vaunted concreteness of the Hegelian philosophy was itself the product of sheer abstraction. For to Hegel 'concreteness' was always associated with essences or concepts and consisted simply in 'the totality of their interrelated and mutually determining constituent determinations'<sup>2</sup>—in other words, in the entirety of the system of their relations. Concreteness was therefore characteristic only of system and *the* concrete was *the* System, the Absolute. And the Absolute was conceived as the objectification of the Ultimate Mind, the product of a logic which had ceased to be the logic of thinking and had become instead 'the immanent movements of Being.'<sup>3</sup> If the completeness of the Hegelian abstraction is revealed in anything, it is in the connection thus established between concreteness and logic, a connection which is not so much one of analogy as of identity.

## II

It was precisely this element of abstraction which is at the heart of all idealism of the Hegelian type which provided the focal point for the existentialist reaction. They opposed it in the first place as a fundamental general principle of philosophy, and, more significantly, in the second place, as it was applied explicitly and implicitly to a particular problem—the nature and place in the system of the human individual. For Hegel self-consciousness is to be interpreted exclusively from the point of view of its rationality, and the individual mind is exhibited in line with this as no more than a function or expression of Universal Reason. Indeed in the System the individual counts for very little, if anything at all, since he, along with every other existent and particular entity,

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<sup>2</sup> E. Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, p. 135.

<sup>3</sup> H. J. Blackham, *Six Existentialist Thinkers*, p. 2.

has been taken up into the all-absorbing categories of the rational and the universal, and his individuality, particularity, and actuality have ceased to signify anything like those characteristics which are normally assumed to be fundamental constituents of his being. In other words, in the construction of the Absolute Hegel had effected the obliteration of the reality of the human subject both as an actually existing individual and as one whose lot is essentially cast in the world of time, becoming, and change. The individual had gone, both as an object and as a subject, his finitude, his concreteness, and his responsibility lost in a cold, dead sea of abstraction. To men like Kierkegaard, who must be classed as the initiator of the existentialist way of thinking in modern times, this was not a matter merely for philosophical quibbling. It was a tragedy of major proportions whose possible consequences in human relationships and individual experience were difficult to calculate. And there can be no doubt that in religion, politics, and international affairs the effects and results of the Hegelian way of thinking have more than justified the fears which it engendered in the few who at the time of its propagation had the moral and intellectual perception and courage to resist its all-conquering progress.

### III

It is only against the background which has here been suggested that the distinctive emphases of existentialism as a general movement of thought and life can be adequately understood and appreciated. Taken in itself existentialism is diverse at once in both doctrine and personality, long drawn-out in time (from Kierkegaard to Sartre), and supremely difficult to summarize. Yet it possesses a unity in its diversity which centres primarily in certain fundamental tenets which have been enunciated chiefly in opposition to just that kind of thought which we have been describing. Its unity may in other words be said to consist in its consistent rejection of any attempt by Hegelianism and kindred philosophies and world-views to do away with the actuality and particularity of the existent, especially the human existent, by assimilating it into something other than itself. Theistic, non-theistic, and atheistic existentialists stand firmly together on this point, and their solidarity here is not in the least affected by the marked differences which exist among them in other respects.

Existentialism begins, not with the 'I think' of idealism, but with its own distinctive 'I exist' or 'I live'. Man is not to be eliminated as an individual by being described as simply the product of the engrafting of an Absolute Consciousness upon a restricting sentient organism. He is one, particular, and unique, living and acting out of a centre of spontaneity within a concrete environment. 'What really exists and counts,' says Gabriel Marcel, 'is this particular individual, the real individual which I am, with the incredibly subtle structure of his experience, with all

the special features of the concrete adventure which it is incumbent on him, and on him alone, to live out.<sup>4</sup> With due respect to Hegel, how could all this conceivably be deduced from some abstract rational concept? We are concerned in the here-and-now not with the pseudo-reality of the so-called 'concrete universal', but with the actual reality of the concrete individual. And this concrete individual is perpetually and inescapably involved in the actualities of his existence. Even in his thought he cannot ever step out of existence into some abstract world, for his very thought itself is essentially bound up with his existence. So that the perspective so dear to the speculative philosopher is forever denied him, despite his best efforts to achieve it. Existentialism is thus 'an attempt at philosophy from the standpoint of the actor, instead of, as has been customary, from that of the spectator.'<sup>5</sup> We must come to grips with the human situation as one in which we are actually involved, a situation characterized by our finitude, estrangement, ignorance, and despair. And if coming to grips with it means anything, it means participating in it, with the whole of our existence—not just with rationality, which implies detachment, but with all our temporal, spatial, historical, psychological, sociological and biological conditions. For the fundamental issues confronting the human reality are not such as can be regarded with disinterest. They are matters of passionate concern, questions of the very basis of our being, and require accordingly our whole-hearted involvement in the search for what becomes when it is apprehended *our* truth and *our* meaning. 'The human quest is prompted by the heat, confusion, and mortal anguish of one struggling in the mêlée, not by the detached interest of the umpire whose seat lifts him high above the struggle.'<sup>6</sup> Detachment and disinterested objectivity are not only out of place, and unable to provide us with what we need; they involve a radical denial of one of the crucial, constitutive elements in the situation. The truth that is sought is simply not of the kind which can be grasped from an abstract point of view. For in our quest we are not like the mathematician who abstractly seeks to prove his theorem or to solve his equation. We are rather like the drowning man who in the passion of despair strives to reach the life-belt. If we confront the problem of God it is because in our anxiety we seek a ground for security. If we turn to the question of immortality it is because we are overwhelmed by the certainty of our own death. If it is the truth of an object which we seek, it is just as much, even more, the truth for a subject, that subject which we are ourselves. And there is involved in this kind of truth an intimacy of appropriation which excludes on the one hand the objectivity of the demonstrable, and on the other hand the interminable suspension

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted by H. Kuhn, *Encounter With Nothingness*, p. 46.

<sup>5</sup> E. L. Allen, *Existentialism from Within*, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> H. Kuhn, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

of decision essentially associated with the search for final proof. The existentialist thinker, 'the actual, living, striving person whose thought is embedded in his life, is indeed part of the process of living',<sup>7</sup> cannot afford either to postpone the problems till he has the time to grapple with them or to withhold affirmation until he has obtained indefeasible evidence. In the depths of his subjectivity he has to make up his mind and effect a commitment which will enable him to live through the uncertainty and anxiety of this present hour with fortitude, determination, and, it may be, with hope.

#### IV

'Our point of departure', writes Jean-Paul Sartre, assuming the rôle of spokesman for existentialists generally, 'is . . . the subjectivity of the individual . . .'.<sup>8</sup> Historically it was in the first instance their point of departure from the all-engulfing Absolute of the Hegelians, and from the dread capacity of pure thought to nullify all distinctions and destroy all particulars in the featureless unity of its universals. And theologically it has provided for some of the thinkers of the Church a point of departure from every system of thought-fashion which has tended to submerge in any way whatever the reality of the obligation and responsibility resting upon every individual as an individual to make on his own account an absolute decision. It cannot be regarded as fortuitous that theology has found in the heat of existentialism's polemic principles which have provided for it some of its most powerful and fruitful stimuli. It is not by chance that Bultmann can say of Heidegger that his 'existentialist analysis of the ontological structure of being would seem to be no more than a secularized, philosophical version of the New Testament view of human life'.<sup>9</sup> In a significant sense Christian theology and existentialist philosophy are concerned at least on one level with precisely the same thing—with the human individual both in the reality of his ontological situation as a self-conscious, finite being, and in the condition of decisive responsibility into which he enters when he emerges, awakened, from subjection to the influence of the corporate security of his group into an awareness of himself as he is, and as he will and ought to be. If theology today must be influenced by any movement of secular thought (and there is a sense in which it cannot avoid some influence of that kind unless it is to withdraw itself from the world altogether) it could have chosen no better source from which to receive stimulation than existentialism. For it is certain that under its influence it will hardly be allowed ever to forget that Christianity

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<sup>7</sup> E. L. Allen, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>8</sup> J.-P. Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism* (tr. P. Mairet), p. 44.

<sup>9</sup> R. Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth* (ed. H. W. Bartsch ; tr. R. H. Fuller), p. 24.

is at its heart not so much an affair of philosophy or of reason as of personal faith, passion, and commitment; and I suppose if there has been anything that organized and intellectual Christianity has been most prone to forget throughout its history it is just that. To dull the sharpness of the paradoxes of faith beneath a cushion of apparent rationality, to obscure for the individual the imperative of the call to decisive choice, and to absorb him then into a collective both of belief and of order—these have always been among the saddest and most dangerous tendencies that the historical Church has manifest. And to have made at least some of the Church's thinkers plainly aware of these tendencies and of their tragic potentialities may well prove in the end to have been the most valuable and long-lasting result of the contribution that existentialism has made to theology.

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#### VISUAL AIDS

*'Anybody who makes an image of a man or a bird or a reptile or any other created thing and treats it as though it were God, falls under anathema. But the contempt of the material because it is material is a Manichaeian error. Scripture testifies against the forbidding of the use of material things as a help to the worship of God.'*

ST. JOHN of Damascus