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Existentialism: The Atheistic Thread

JAMES T. GRIFFIN

In a previous article we considered the roots of Existentialism, seeing it as a revolt against Lutheran theology with its nominalistic idea of justification and against Hegelian idealism which divided man from the concrete and the real. The Fathers of Existentialism, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, brought forth two different trends, one atheistic and libertine, the other religious and God-loving, even Christian. I should like to consider the first of these, the atheistic and libertine faction headed by Martin Heidegger as the philosopher or metaphysician of the atheistic trend and by Jean Paul Sartre, the playwright, its litterateur.

Martin Heidegger (1889-) was born in Messkirch of peasant stock. He possesses the telluric power of the peasantry even in his most learned moments. He is a disciple of Husserl and as such is preoccupied with directing all attention to "things themselves" especially the lived facts of consciousness. But whereas Husserl wanted to arrive at these things in their pure generality and describe them in order to determine their essence without caring for their existence, Heidegger reverses the process and wanted only to arrive at the existent.

Human existence is *Dasein* — being there — immediately bound up with the world of objects. The original, primitive feeling is that of being "projected" into the world without having chosen it or wished it. At the moment of consciousness the

human existence is already there and feels unarmed, precarious, deserted. European men have lost their sense of being; they have become just one of the many usable objects like tables, chairs, books and cats which are simply present. Human beings were not meant merely to be present; they should exist. That is, we should *ex sistere*, stand outside ourselves, going out and comprehending the objects which are present.

The trouble with man is that he has fallen into the habit of behaving like these objects; he is not aware of his own existence. Heidegger wants to impress upon man the *awe*-fulness of his existence. Man realizes that his existence will end in death. But too often he realizes it only in an essential way when he says "One dies at three score and ten" and fails to realize that it is I who exist and who have to die, not *one*. No *one* can do it for me.

By talking of *one* doing this or that, a man is trying to escape the burden of existence and casting the burden on the indefinite one.

By committing myself to existence, I am really committing myself to death, heading for it every moment, for death is the peak moment of existence, since in death I stand outside myself. Thus man is cast off into a world where he is doomed to death. This fact engenders anguish, for he has recognized the ultimate meaninglessness of all things including himself. He must endure his existence and this anguish which accompanies existence. And ultimately this means accepting existence unto death.

Yet in talking of "standing outside ourselves in death" Heidegger does not give a promise of existence after death. Far from it! His very method which is phenomenological precludes such a promise since this method is limited to what is given and experienced here and now. Moreover, any promise of existence after death is one more cheap way of blunting the sharpness and anguish of existence.

The meaning of the world comes from me, from what he calls "projects", that is, from the free way in which I direct

myself, I realize myself in the world. The aim of man is to exist *authentically*, which occurs when a man realizing all this still begets "pro-jects" which give meaning to himself and to things, even though it is done uselessly.

If all men saw clearly the total nothing in which they are suspended the future of humanity would be nil. Most men take refuge from reality in "inauthentic" existence, in the impersonal existence of *Das Man* (the "One"), and in this existence man creates all sorts of idols to distract him from his own existence: science, humanity, the Divine Absolute, etc. He does this to forget death and to reassure existence.

For Heidegger the central human existential experience is anxiety, not fear. Fear has a definite, limited object whereas anxiety is essentially undetermined, indefinite. You cannot put your finger on it. In fear there is a beast or a man or some future event which I fear; but when a man is asked the object of his anxiety he can only answer "Nothing". Yet this "nothing" exercises causality; it corrodes a man's life, it spreads out everywhere.

Thus Heidegger becomes the philosopher of Nothingness. Yet he will not call this a metaphysic of nothingness for he wants to avoid saying that nothingness is real. So he resolves his problem by stating that nothingness itself produces nothingness (*Das Nichts selbst nichtet*).

Heidegger's distinction between anxiety and fear is profound and important. The profundity and importance is not lessened by his idea that the object of anxiety is Nothingness. We know that it is something, but we cannot come to name it or to see what that something is.

But were we to ask Heidegger what Being is, he would put us off for a while; he has not yet answered that question with which he ends his study called *BEING AND TIME*. The subsequent volume with the answer has not yet appeared.

Thus Heidegger fails to give us his full system since he has not yet achieved it. Yet he is sure that such complete ontology is possible. It is for this reason that he repudiates the name of

existential for his philosophy and prefers to call it existentialistic, since existential would deny that a general theory of being is possible, while existentialistic does not.

Yet he insists that man must be open to being, to the manifestation of being. That is why he follows Nietzsche in stating that an act of the will is basic to all knowledge; man must freely assume the attitude of letting things become present to him in their overtess. Therefore man is orientated to being and only by embracing as his fundamental project openness to the manifestation of being can he enjoy his own mode of being, his existence.

Let us leave now the philosopher of atheistic existentialism and turn to its popularizer, to its poet, dramatist, novelist. Jean Paul Sartre is probably the best known of all the existentialists outside of Kierkegaard. Jean Paul Sartre (b. 1905) follows Heidegger and popularizes him through his plays and novels in which he tries to draw the logical conclusions of atheism.

He starts with that profound ennui which is a revelation of the existant in its totality. In an ontological illumination the existant appears to me as simply there, without reason, absurd, contingent, superfluous. This "en-soi" is being, brute fact, so crammed with itself that it entertains no relationship with self or with others. Yet consciousness questions and enters into relationship with the world. From this results the "pour-soi," man being present to himself (*à soi*) and condemned to freedom. Between "en-soi" and "pour-soi" there is the abyss of nothingness. Between matter and self-consciousness there is no bridge.

Philosophers have made the grave mistake of attributing the highest dignity to consciousness of self (*présence à soi*). But the plenitude of being is found only in the coincidence of the identical. Thus man, this unfortunate "pour-soi", seeks to escape himself by aspiring to find the quietude of "en-soi" without losing the benefit of consciousness. It dreams of the "en-soi-pour-soi" which religions call God; but this is a contradiction. God by essence is contradiction and hence nothing;

there being an irreducible gulf between "en-soi," which is necessary and eternal, and "pour-soi," which is contingent. So the notion of God as eternal consciousness is self-contradiction, consciousness with a quality of matter.

How consciousness arises and why it is necessarily contingent is never explained by Sartre. But all human endeavor is an effort to translate into act the impossible desire to make consciousness eternal, to divinize the self. All of these acts are done in the bad faith by which we try to hide from ourselves the anguishing truth that our consciousness is a manifestation of nothingness.

Man then is radically lonely, abandoned. So he must make himself by following his own initiative. One thing is certain above all else; man is free. He may try to deny or avoid that freedom; but it is there. In every "project" man chooses himself every moment and each one of us is nothing but the acts of our life.

This freedom is not a blessing but a curse, for we cannot do what we want and we feel responsible for what we are. But it is not only a curse; it is also the only source of our grandeur. We achieve this grandeur by renouncing the serious-mindedness which believes in the objective value of ends. Man must show his bravery by taking himself in all his usefulness as his end. He shows his courage by facing bravely the atheism and nothingness that follow death.

Thus man's existence precedes his essence, for he creates his own essence by his free choices. There is no justification for his choices outside himself. But his freedom keeps him from the evil, the sinful avoidance of choice by conforming to meaningless conventions. Thus man can be defined as "a useless passion" and Sartre sees no distinction between the solitary drinker and the leader of a nation. In fact the quietism of the former may, for Sartre, be superior to the vain agitation of the latter, because he may be more conscious of man's real purpose, which is nothingness.

Sartre develops his ideas with a rich literary imagery. He is preoccupied with the idea of love. He reduces it to *selfish-*

ness. He finds love a kind of hell and he defines hell as "other people." In loving there are only two attitudes, sadism and masochism. In sadism the lover tries to make the other an object under his power, whereas in masochism the lover allows himself to become an object for the other. Both are futile, since man can never capture the subjectivity of another nor can another capture one's own subjectivity.

This perverted idea of love has been analyzed by the Louvain psychiatrist, Etienne de Greeff, who says that Sartre has never passed the stage of infantilism which seeks only self in autoeroticism. The effective and moral personality of others has never interested him. In his blindness he thinks that all are like himself. He admits no distinction between the conceptual and real orders.

Heidegger too has criticised Sartre. In his more recent writings Heidegger has opened his system to the possibility that particular beings can convey some idea of the transcendent being. Hence he may well serve as a bridge between the extremes of atheism and theism in Existentialism. He wishes that Sartre would reexamine his whole approach to being and especially the whole phenomenological method. He now asks himself: can philosophy distinguish between God and being as such? This is a question to which Heidegger himself has not yet offered an answer.

Looking back on Heidegger and Sartre, the representatives of atheistic existentialism, we find again, as in the case of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, good and bad.

On the dark side of the ledger we can note their rejection of God, which for Sartre is absolute, almost a passion, but for Heidegger is changing into an "openness to transcendental being". Furthermore there is a disdain for moral values, for any norms of morality outside the individual who acts. Morality tends to become merely subjective. There is also a profound pessimism springing from the utter uselessness of human existence. It is relieved at times by an appeal to grandeur, forever alone, condemned to nothingness. Finally, there is Sartre's perversion of love and the denial, by both, of life after death.

On the bright side is Heidegger's new turning toward transcendent being. There is also the usual existential insistence on personal responsibility rooted in man's freedom. Heidegger's study of anxiety and fear is a profound contribution to human psychology as is his analysis of man's efforts to escape himself and his individuality in the nameless generality of *one*. Good too is the directing of men to their own existence and the *awfulness* of that fact. Such awareness is needed by modern man who has a tendency to lose himself in doing things rather than in being something.

This atheistic thread has descended from Nietzsche. The theistic thread (to be traced in another article) originates with Kierkegaard and is today exemplified in Karl Jaspers and Gabriel Marcel.