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The Fathers of Existentialism

JAMES T. GRIFFIN

EXISTENTIALISTS repudiate system. They affirm that existentialism cannot be systematized. It is in essence, if one may use *that* word, beyond all system. It is a revolt against system. Since it denies essence, it escapes all categories. *Quot existentialistae tot existentialismi*: there are as many existentialisms as there are existentialists.

Despite such repudiation the existentialists themselves have some way or other of recognizing one another. They gather themselves into groups. They correspond with one another. They exchange ideas with one another.

What are the hall-marks, the signs by which they know one another?

I

First of all, existentialists are in revolt against idealism whether it stems from Berkeley or Hegel. Soren Kierkegaard, whom many regard as the father of existentialism, started with a critique of Hegel. His own ministry was handicapped by the Hegelian theology which he had absorbed in the seminary; now he found that it revolted him and his flock, so he submitted it to criticism and started his march at the head of modern existentialists.

Kierkegaard defended the priority of existence over essence. To destroy the world of Hegel he insisted that man is actually confronted with the real world, with the universe. Existence is given to him. It is part of his experience. He need

not seek to justify it. He did not create it by his idea of it; it is simply there. It is an irreducible term. It is transrational. One just bumps into it. It *is*.

For Kierkegaard, there is no need to undergo the Hegelian search for the Absolute. God is beyond all such reasoning and searching. He is achieved as a result of crisis. This crisis occurs when a man feels (as Kierkegaard felt) alone, separated from the world and from God. He is helplessly alone, yet words fail to express his anguish. Words too belong to the realm of essence but the lonely man is in the world of existence. Being unable to resolve his problem by any rational analysis, and feeling utterly on the brink of despair, there comes an encounter with the real, with God Who is beyond all reason. It is not a matter of the head, as Hegel would have it, but of the heart, as Pascal would say. To find God, however, it is not enough to undergo anguish; one must make an act of submission, of humility which consists in foreswearing pride by repudiating essence. Once this submission to existence is made, man sees that God is a paradox, unachievable, yet achieved.

A similar paradox is found in Christianity which gives us the impossible paradox, the Incarnation, a combination of divinity and humanity in one Person, the appearance of eternity in time. Sin too is a paradox, since at once it attracts and repels. It is treated paradoxically by God Who is both just Judge and merciful Father. The world too, as experienced existentially, is a paradox: it is evil yet it is God's creation. Paradoxes abound: religious life is a paradox of blessedness and suffering; so is faith which is an act of man and a gift of God. Finally the fact of revelation is achieved in the moment when man's existential life is confronted with eternity in Jesus. This meeting of time and eternity is revelation for we are sure that we have come before God. Revelation cannot be argued to, it cannot be proved. It just is. The rational approach, says Kierkegaard, distorts revelation by reason, argument, dialectic and definitions. Revelation is — take it or leave it!

Existentialism in its origins is also a revolt against Lutheran theology. It is a repudiation of Luther's thesis of justifica-

tion by faith alone and the practical consequences of the doctrine. This revolt for Kierkegaard became a source of personal prayer and profound piety. This piety is one of the main sources of attack from modern Lutheran theologians like Bultmann and Barth. The latter thinker has written that the idea of existentialism was a brutish conglomeration of ethical revolt. There is no doubt that Kierkegaard wanted to feel personally responsible in the battle of life. Lutheran justification removed all such responsibility. For Kierkegaard life was a great drama in which man must face the problem of being and non-being. He must discover the meaning of human existence. Only by facing up to this reality can a man live truly. Any other kind of living is to reject being and to make a joke of it. To live truly man must take being seriously and face God. Here is where responsibility and irresponsibility clash in a terrible struggle. We cannot escape the problem which will find its solution in either hate or love.

Such a brief analysis of Kierkegaard's approach to God and God's revelation shows that his method is intensely personal, rooted in his experience of loneliness due to his fear of and disgust with his father and his unhappy courtship with Regina Olsen. He found refuge in almost pure subjectivity, for any other kind of "existence" is not meaningful and esthetic. Such false existences put man in a group, generalize him, make him a universal, an essence. Only in an ineffable relationship with God can man find escape.

The whole approach of existentialism is psychological rather than ontological. It has a tremendous appeal because it is personal, winning interest and enthusiasm in a world weary of abstraction. It is non-technical, a philosophy and theology of the concrete, of the actual, of the situation which this individual man faces. It puts the dialectical problem in terms of existence alone.

This phenomenological approach of Kierkegaard highlights man's experience of his own freedom. Man's aim is not to discover his own being and to "look at" it in a detached way. Rather, he must be his own being by choosing it con-

stantly. His personality is founded on his free self-determination flowing from his free will. Man's being is what he freely makes it to be. Every man must enter the list of freedom. Each one is himself, individual, beyond categories. To try to imprison free man in essences is a futile Hegelian task. No man can be captured by another's intellect; for as soon as he is grasped he can change into something else, he can elect a new self. Each man must be constantly engaged in making this new being. Yet the resolution of the whole process is hidden; the individual man does not know whether he is God's elect or the child of diabolical illusion.

Kierkegaard's own history, while unique (as all personal existences are, even for the most rigorous of the "essentialist" philosophers) has several points in common with other existentialists. This is true of men as far apart in their ultimate resolution of this philosophy as Marcel and Sartre. There is a constant sense of crisis. There is a feeling of loneliness which engenders anguish. There is an awareness of the tragic in life, of man's many disappointments. There is a suffering which flows from a sense of impotence to achieve one's desire.

Yet it would be wrong to summarize the movement as another subjectivism. For it is not by any means confined to the conceptual order. That is the one thing it is not. Neither is it anti-realistic. We might say that it has a very high, almost exclusive esteem for subjectivity.

The existentialists to a man are interested in the concrete individual. They are interested in discovery. Now, only the individual can know his own states; only he can bear witness to them. Yet in the most profound human experiences where one's own freedom is especially engaged it is difficult if not impossible to communicate what has been experienced. This is found in human love where the lover is tongue-tied before the beloved, in divine love where the mystic writes that the contact with God was ineffable. These profound and sublime activities of men cannot be categorized into essences; they simply exist. Man by his freedom chooses them or rejects them.

Kierkegaard was obsessed with the terrible fact that in Lutheran theology (which was a fruit of Occam's nominalism) grace was not a reality possessed by man. The Lutheran insistence on a merely extrinsic justification by faith alone without any interior renovation into divine sonship had as much to do with his revolt as did his poor seminary course in philosophy and theology. Both Luther and Hegel were the enemies of his spirit.

Kierkegaard saw that the first Adam is "essentialistic" in that he is a generic man bestowing his corrupted nature on all men. But the second Adam, Christ, is not generic or 'essentialistic.' Rather he is eminently singular, unique. His followers too must be singular, "existentialistic." As Karl Barth has pointed out, Kierkegaard was in revolt against Lutheran dogma, including the insistence on man's obligation to marry. (Was that why he refused to marry Miss Olsen?) He leaves the life of essence (marriage) for the life of self-existence (celibacy).

This desire for escape obsessed him. Man must escape from inauthentic existence in all the fripperies of life. For exterior activity he must substitute interior life and not dissolve his personality in futilities. This escape is accomplished on three levels: esthetic, ethical, religious. The lowest is esthetic whereby the poet or artist lives for the moment. Yet this very esthetic existence presupposes and asserts free will. Thus he advances to ethical existence which exteriorizes him into a group, thus tending to destroy his individuality. Hence if he wishes to be truly free he must pass to a religious existence where the individual as such enters into ineffable relation with God. The faith which brings us there needs no criteria, no objective reasons. Pure subjectivity reigns: alone with God, the believer makes the leap into the absurd. He risks all to find a truth which serves to illumine all his life. One must enter the lists, one must be engaged in the struggle for authentic existence. Detachment is futile and fruitless—barren. Man's being will be what he freely chooses it to be. The supreme choice is made on the religious plane.

II

With Kierkegaard as the fountainhead it would seem that existentialism would be necessarily theistic. Yet another father of this movement who resembled Kierkegaard in his revolt against both Luther and Hegel produced a diametrically opposite existentialism, an atheistic existentialism which continues today. This other father was Friedrich Nietzsche.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) summed up his own tragedy in a letter to his sister Elizabeth: "A man of spiritual depth needs friends unless he still has God for a friend. But I have neither God nor friends."

But in tearing down God and erecting superman, Nietzsche had as his burning desire to remake human existence. He despised the hypocrisy of nineteenth century Europe. He saw in philosophy not a parlor game or a juggling of words and concepts but throbbing substantial reality. In this he insisted on the subjectivity of the thinker rather than on the objectivity of a system, on the growth of human personality rather than on the conceptual integrity of abstract thought. For him the test of philosophy is its ability to form a human being.

Looking on man he was not naive like Rousseau who found man naturally good. Nietzsche found man fundamentally wrong, corrupted, and he blamed this corruption on Christianity. So man must be dechristianized. The higher man will be created not by supernature but by nature, precisely by the will-to-power. Nietzsche is the violent opponent of all theorists whose prototype for him is Hegel and the dialectical idealism which he fostered.

Nietzsche rejected his Lutheran heritage (both his grandfathers were Lutheran pastors as also was his father) and thought to find salvation not in the grace of Christ but in his own power. By his own inner power man can raise himself beyond the absurdity and nullity of existence: He is self-sufficient, not needing God, and by his efforts benevolence and decency will reign. For Nietzsche, Bismarck with his naked

power personified his ideal. Artistically he would find this reechoed in the music of Richard Wagner.

Nietzsche was fascinated by war. To him it seemed a very good thing for it ennobled human beings, making them aspire to order and duty and responsibility. Thus he came to despise the romantic Latin nations of Europe with their utilitarianism and saw in Germany with its soldiers and its poets the hope for leadership over the "decadent" Latins.

While teaching the Greek classics he came to criticize the Socratic spirit for its rationalism and love of pure knowledge. Life must be viewed not rationally but artistically as in the great Greek tragedies. Man is a creature of pain and suffering and evil. He is beset with anguish and in need of redemption. The cry of man for salvation must be answered. Nietzsche refused the Christian answer as well as the "will-to-live" ideal of the sentimentalists who would have man detach himself from all things, even from the will to live. This seemed to him to be too ascetic a renunciation, too much of the Buddhistic yearning for Nirvana.

For Nietzsche the solution consists in a commitment to the world of phenomena, to a ceaseless creative activity which can transform itself into ecstatic rapture in art. Here is found peace after war has generated change, tension and strife.

Nietzsche is anti-rational and anti-moral in his philosophy. The aim of life is self realization. "Be yourself!" is his cry. The two enemies are fear and laziness which are encouraged by society with its patterns and conformism. True existence is emancipation from such collective pressures. Such emancipation produces the artist, the philosopher, the saint.

The enemy of such emancipation is herd morality whereby all are expected to conform to the bourgeois pattern of action. This stifles initiative and destroys art, thought and sanctity. Unusual individuals must not be prevented from their complete development which eventually results in superman. This superman is a sort of a Man-God, there being no God. Loyalty to transcendence is to be suppressed. Nietzsche identified the

sad state of the world in the nineteenth century with Christianity and Christianity's God. Both must go!

Nietzsche declares that the most important event of the nineteenth century is that God is dead. But he retains a certain divinity: the cry "I Will" of the superman will eventually come to be "I am." They will become Gods. It is the old temptation of the garden all over again and many of our contemporaries have succumbed to it. For Nietzsche our world of becoming makes an immutable transcendent Being impossible and he would remove all piety to such a Being. Zarathustra has faith in this earthly life as his all in all. Nietzsche substitutes for eternity and being a consecration to the finite world of becoming as an end in itself. This is our lasting city. Ontology then becomes merely the eternal return of the same. Being is becoming. The real is identified with finite phenomena.

III

Both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche are philosophers of the concrete. They are preoccupied with the individual, with the personal against the impersonal and the abstract and the universal. They fear that abstract systems destroy human personality in generalities. So they embrace a phenomenological method of inquiry through which by an intense reflection of the individual upon his own freedom he uncovers the significance of his own being.

But this significance is different for these two existentialists. Nietzsche's man is self-sufficient; Kierkegaard's man needs God and humility. Nietzsche thinks he can achieve the heights alone; Kierkegaard feels that he desperately needs God. Nietzsche rejects a moral system; Kierkegaard does not. There is place for piety in Kierkegaard's existentialism; not so in Nietzsche's.

For both, however, truth is the taste of one's ontological experience of anguish, despair, hope, faith, etc. The pure intellectual representation of truth can no more give truth than a dream of happiness gives happiness. Existentialism is ex-

plicitly conscious of the relationship between life and doctrine. All our individual activity has a true ontological value. The aim of life is to make that activity more and more authentic. But sad to relate this authentic existence means diametrically opposed things for Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. It means diametrically opposed things too for their followers.

In these two systems we can discover both good and evil. For the evils we might single out the denial of the power of the human mind to achieve truth on the one hand and the exaggeration of man's potencies on the other. There is a repudiation of essence which begets relativity of truth according to mere subjective norms. There is a denial of God along with a terrible pessimism about the human situation unrelieved by any hope. Finally there is a divorce from moral norms and a fear of being objectivized.

On the credit side we can list seven or eight goods. Pius XII in his encyclical letter *Humani generis* summons the Christian world to study other systems, giving among other reasons the fact that there is always some truth in these systems. In the existentialism of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche we may enumerate these good points: (1) They make philosophy an intensely personal experience and they order it to life. (2) They point up the vanity of a half-hearted Christianity which is a sham and a veneer which draws men from Christ and His Church. (3) Their preoccupation with the freedom of the will is a strong antidote to the deterministic systems which are so prevalent. (4) They insist on personalism against mass materialism which came into its own toward the middle of the last century when Nietzsche was born and Kierkegaard was dying. (5) They affirm the virtue of fortitude against despair before the hardships of life and they despise conformity for conformity's sake. (6) They engender a sense of personal responsibility for one's own part in the human story. Each individual is important. (7) At least Kierkegaard values humility before God as an antidote to the terrible pride of Nietzsche.

These two are the fathers of existentialism. They have their similarities and their differences and in their systems we

see the seeds of existentialism. From these two men two streams of existentialism may be traced, one stemming from Nietzsche—an atheistic existentialism with Martin Heidegger as its philosopher and Jean Paul Sartre as its popularizer in novels and plays; the other stemming from Kierkegaard—a theistic and Christian existentialism with Karl Jaspers as its theorist and Gabriel Marcel its popularizer, or at least its most popular exponent.¹

¹ EDITOR'S NOTE. This is the first of a series of articles on existentialism. The next will be an examination of Sartre by Ralph B. Gehring and of the theistic and atheistic threads in existentialism by James T. Griffin.