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EXISTENTIALISM: Horizon or Dead End?

By JOHN A. ELBERT, S.M.

I. REALITY:

All philosophers have sought the answer to this question: WHAT IS REALITY? Most philosophers have come up with straightforward answers, couched in simple language; *Plato* for instance, who says the *IDEA* is real; the IDEAL WORLD IS THE REAL WORLD. The Aristotelian-Thomistic philosopher also answers the question without benefit of obscure terminology. He says tersely: Whatever IS, is real; that is to say, whatever has BEING, possible or actual, is real.

All men who use their intelligence ask the same question, though they sometimes equate reality with value; they may express themselves in some form as the following: What makes sense? Or, what is worth while?

All men, following, perhaps unconsciously, the lead of some great thinker, may be divided into: NOMINALISTS who consider WORDS as real; IDEALISTS who consider IDEAS as real; REALISTS who hold that THINGS are real; EXISTENTIALISTS who restrict reality to the concrete, individual existent; ARTISTS who consider IMAGES as real.

Hardly any individual is a pure distillation of only one of these; most men are compounded of all shades of thinking, variously.

It has been indicated above in the realist definition, that there are two realms of REALITY, a domain of existent beings and a realm of possible beings. The realm of existent beings is truly a vast universe. But it is only little compared to the universe of possible beings that is open to the creative mind and imagination of men; and it is as nothing compared to the universe of possible beings that is open to the creative mind of God.

The first realm of reality, the existent world, is that world which is with us as microcosm and macrocosm. The second realm of reality is the vast, illimitable field of opportunity for human achievement. Some modern philosophers have called this unsounded pool of possible reality, a void thus making of it a merely negative entity. For the Christian philosopher, the realm of possible being is a realm of positive reality, which has been given to man by God as an inexhaustible field for man's creativity.

Every great thinker in human annals has had an intuition of the realm of possible beings. Every great artist has had a vision of this same realm of possible beings as hospitable to embodiments for new ideas in myriad forms of beauty compounded of truth and goodness. But in most cases of intuition or vision there was besides the direct object of human perception, the subjective awareness of one's own limited

nature and operation. This awareness could inspire hope or despair.

Augustine saw it at first as the projection of his own fallible reason, a vast tangle of possible error, an unmixed evil, a *principle* of error like an evil deity voiding the principle of unmixed good, God. He repudiated Manes and clove to Christ.

Aquinas viewed that universe of possible beings; his gaze turned upward and his mind formulated a single question: "What is God?" After a life-time (all too short) of study and reflection, the Angelic Doctor must have had another intuition of the unlimited realm of possible being. That vision made his lifetime of reasoned analysis and reflection appear as mere "straw" in a realm of unlimited form and beauty that opened on an eternal horizon.

Pascal looked into the abyss of possible being and expressed himself in a single utterance: "The silence of those infinite regions inspires me with fear." *Kierkegaard* had a crushing reaction of dread. *Sartre's* response to the intuition of a boundless world of possible being: "There is no infinite Good." *Shakespeare* had the poet's vision of this uncharted realm and spoke his word through characters stark as pagan tragedy that knew not the God-Incarnate, so, in *Macbeth*:

"Life's but a walking shadow . . .

. . . It is a tale

Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,

Signifying nothing."

"I draw back shuddering from the quest . . .," says *Browning*, in "Their Last Ride Together."

Those who saw only a void, illimitable in extent, unsounded in depth, with no span from nothingness to infinite good, with no bridge from God to man, were either ignorant of the Incarnation or closed their eyes to it. For the supreme product of the realm of possible being, the Word-Incarnate, was given to man by God as the prototype of every discovery and as the exemplar of every achievement to which the human mind can aspire and which the genius of the creative imagination of man can embody.

II. ESSENCE AND EXISTENCE:

Sound thinking rooted in common sense draws a distinction between the ESSENCE of things and the EXISTENCE of things. It distinguishes between the ABSTRACT and the CONCRETE. For example:

In the reality "Man," philosophy and common sense distinguish between "human nature" which is what each man has (an essence) and this particular being (not human nature) which exists. ESSENCE expresses the static part of things. EXISTENCE expresses the dynamic part of things.

In the Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophy both "essence" and "existence" are necessary for understanding a finite reality. In the order of reality (Metaphysics) essence comes before existence; whereas in the order of knowledge (Epistemology) existence

precedes essence. Our contacts with REALITY must begin with something that exists and from something that exists, we arrive at the idea of an essence, i.e., *we get to know what a thing is*. What is the procedure?

The fact that we *can answer* the *question*: “What is this thing?” (a pencil for instance) by a *common noun*, is proof positive that we have *concepts*, i.e., immaterial representations of things — we recognize an existent thing as belonging to a class. It is by the apprehension of an essence through a concept that we can enter the domain of *thinking* and *meaning*.

Thinkers who concentrate solely on the abstract (essence) aspect of reality run into a pure idealism (like Hegel’s); those who concentrate solely on the concrete (existent) aspect of reality verge into existentialism (like Sartre’s).

There are those, however, who stress equally the abstract and the concrete aspects of reality, the concrete aspect coming first in our experience, the abstract aspect following upon the intellectual apprehension of the form of the concrete reality. It is this contact between subject and object that issues in meaning.

III. EXISTENTIALISM:

A. *Historical Evolution:*

In ordinary terminology, therefore, we distinguish the nature or *essence* of a thing from its *existence*. By essence we denote *what* a thing is; by existence, *that* a thing is.

Essence and existence though really distinct and irreducible in a contingent being, are yet related to each other. Practically all major philosophical systems are concerned with the nature and the degree of the relationship between essence and existence.

Philosophies which give precedence and stress to essence are classed as *essentialist* — systems which give priority and stress to existence, are classed as *existentialist*.

Such precedence and stress may vary from a nice balance between essence and existence to the point where, theoretically at least, existence is absorbed in essence (as in Hegel) or, contrariwise, essence is absorbed in existence (as in Sartre).

The Danish theologian and philosopher, SÖREN KIERKEGAARD, has been generally considered as the fountain-head of modern existentialism. The movement arose in the early nineteenth century as a reaction to the extreme essentialism of Hegel whose metaphysical mind was preoccupied with ideas and abstractions almost to the complete exclusion of the real world of existent beings. Kierkegaard’s existentialism was aimed at the heart of the Hegelian dialectic which posited “BECOMING” as the passage from non-existence to existence.

Hegel also reduced the individual to the status of a particular and incomplete emergence of the (universal) Spirit much like a white-cap on the surf of the vast, rolling sea. Kierkegaard considered such a view of man as an assault on the uniqueness of the individual person. He takes his stand on the basic truths of Christianity that stress the importance of the individual. His direct objective is to place man in his individuality above humanity considered as a universal essence. Kierkegaard is

directly concerned with the practical order of Christian living not with “humanity” but with “man;” and he conceives the outstanding characteristic of “man” as “singleness,” revealing itself in his solitude and bewilderment over against God. Kierkegaard’s purpose was the integration of the individual man through faith in God.

This relation of the individual to God is the most significant feature in Kierkegaard’s view of human life. Out of it arises that fear (Angst) which men feel in face of the infinite. Such fear is the beginning of all genuine religion; from it man is urged to make the leap of faith which merits freedom and the opportunity for personal salvation.

But for Kierkegaard this work of salvation is a lonely operation; the “single” man is in communication only with the infinite; he has no communication with other finite beings; others are the “crowd” from which the “single” man must separate himself in order to find the path to God alone. The crowd, says Kierkegaard, is the non-truth; the “single” man is the truth; more precisely, he is the way to truth.

Here is where Existentialism runs aground, even Kierkegaard’s and more surely any form of atheistic existentialism. It cuts off every relation with other finite beings and cancels out the immeasurable world of possible social co-operation; the world of other existents remains, but as a drag for Kierkegaard; for Sartre also, other finite existents remain, and not merely as a drag on the individual but as the atheist’s “hell” as Sartre says in “HUIT CLOS.”

An added contribution to the historical evolution of modern existentialism was furnished by such philosophers as Nietzsche, Bergson, and others who represent a school of thought which opposed the dualism generated by the Platonic-Augustinian-Cartesian tradition, especially on the body-mind relationship. This movement characterized as a “Philosophy of Life” (Vitalism) was the immediate forerunner of twentieth century Existentialism.

Current Existentialism, therefore, had a new beginning coinciding roughly with World War I, but it still harks back to Kierkegaard for its positive ingredients, the dread of existence, the uniqueness of the concrete and existent as against the abstract and possible; likewise for its critical attitude toward the pretensions of a self-sufficient intellectual process of “Becoming,” which is the Hegelian solution for spanning the chasm between Being and Non-Being.

This current movement is not, however, a mere imitation of the Kierkegaardian brand of Existentialism but rather an interpretation and adaptation of the Danish philosopher’s insights to the historical evolution of the individual and society in our own day. One can logically expect a bewildering variety in the newly emerging existentials, both in philosophy and more especially in theology. These latter run the gamut from militant atheism (as in Sartre) to a precarious theism (as in Tillich and Marcel).

The great diversity in current Existentialism results from its inability to come up with a clearcut definition of its own core ingredient, namely, “EXISTENCE.” The existentialist philosopher has cancelled out the realm of essence and blocked the intellectual approach to every reality, including existence itself. He must logically as-

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sume that “existence” is “understood” by virtue of a non-rational act; the word which has come into common use to describe such contact with reality is “encounter” but the mere word itself gives no clear idea as to the nature of the act or the form under which existence itself or any existent reality is “encountered.”

According to the various solutions proposed for this problem, existentialism has been splintered into almost as many forms as there are proponents. Evidently, some of these forms are conflicting but among the great diversity of opinion and counter opinion two responses stand out: Existence is encountered through “crisis” and/or “communion.” “Crisis” might be classified as an extraordinary experience in human life, “communion” as the ordinary experience, growing mostly out of contacts with other persons under average conditions.

The two types of “encounter” (“crisis” and “communion”) give rise to two types of existentialist: the simon-pure “Critical Existentialist” and the yielding “Social Existentialist” who can become indistinguishable from the realist and even the essentialist.

B. A Form of Humanism:

Among the variety of ingredients that make up current Existentialism none is harder to isolate than Humanism. Existentialism appears to be the last stage in the evolution of a Humanism which has its western beginnings in the Graeco-Roman tradition and a re-birth in the Italian Renaissance.

In a most general sense, Humanism goes beyond all other “isms” and reaches back to the Garden of Eden where Adam and Eve first gave the primacy to man over God. Any system of thought which shifts the center of gravity of the universe from God to man in any degree and to any extent can be and has been labelled “Humanism.” Christ confirmed the whole Jewish tradition on this matter and set the world straight in its thinking on this issue in enunciating the great Commandments of the Law. The whole East readily understood and accepted in its thought and life the primacy of God. The West under the influence of the Graeco-Roman tradition was constantly straying from the divine to the human side. For Greek and Roman, *Man* was the measure of all things even of the moral law; and even in the Christian theology beginning with Augustine the emphasis was not directly on God but on man’s relation to God through Grace and Freedom. The shift back to God, as the beginning and the end, was brought about by Aquinas for the whole Medieval period by his initial question before he even penned a word of the “Summa”: “What is God?” he asked his first teachers. For him and for all the scholastic medieval theologians and philosophers, that was the key question of human and divine wisdom.

T. S. Eliot speaks somewhere of Humanism as “a by-product of Protestantism in its last agonies.” Contrary to Eliot, I would rather consider Protestantism as a by-product of the Humanism of the Renaissance. The process of eliminating God from the universe was gradual. In its beginnings the Renaissance could boast of eminent saints and Christian scholars, but in the course of more than four centuries Humanism has evolved in many forms: a true Christian Humanism which set the God-man at

the center of the entire universe; a Nietzschean Humanism which begot a superman; a Marxian brand which set up the economic man; finally the Sartrean Humanism which produced the haunted man.

IV. EXISTENTIALISM IN LIFE AND LITERATURE:

Existentialism has seeped down into the masses through various channels: novels (Hardy), plays (Sartre), the cinema (Bergman).

For the ordinary man the most fundamental question of life is posed in this form: "Is life worth living?"

The atheistic existentialist regards life at best as a predicament and at worst as "a dirty joke." He offers his way of life which effaces the distinction between good and evil and elevates irrationality to the status of a first principle on the pretense that nothing is something; or as one exponent of existentialism (Samuel Beckett) contends, "nothing is more real than nothing." The same thought occurs in Ernest Hemingway, who puts this mock prayer into the mouth of one of his characters: "Our nada, who art in nada, nada be thy name, thy will be nada as it is in nada."

Existentialist literature which is supposed to reflect modern life, reeks with disgust of life. The existentialism of today can be foreseen in the appraisal of life by a mad-dened, hounded Macbeth, as "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing;" or as portrayed in Schiller's "The Maid of Orleans" where Talbot the victim of senseless fate sums up all life in these words: "The king of fools rules the world" and "against stupidity and irrationality the gods themselves contend in vain."

The feeling of the futility of life which characterizes modern existentialism comes from the conviction that we are abandoned in the world, aliens in an unknown land. The thought recurs in Heidegger that man has been flung into the world and left to his own limited resources to cope with powers of evil beyond his control. He speaks of "existence as a rejection." The same strain recurs in Sartre's "Being and Nothingness," in "Nausea," and throughout his novels and plays. The same pessimism pervades practically all the novels and poems of Thomas Hardy whose protagonists are the mere sport of a malign power that batters them in life and leaves them to a future without hope.

As might be expected the existentialist outlook on life has also been pictured in the cinema. Ingmar Bergman has been called the greatest film director in Europe of the mid-twentieth century. His "WILD STRAWBERRIES" won the grand prize at Berlin in 1958. It is this film which best illustrates the existentialist philosophy as it is filtered through the mind of the author speaking through the leading actor of the play in the manner of Joyce's "Ulysses" following the "stream of consciousness" theory of William James.

Bergman's theme hews closely to the existentialist line. It portrays in the life of his doctor-hero, man's search for knowledge in a hostile universe where the channels of knowledge have been effectively closed to him. The ultimate answer is that there

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is no answer, but the quest itself provides its sufficient justification.

Bergman holds that man must pursue the search alone since he is as incapable of understanding other men as he is of understanding himself. Hell is on earth and social life is the process of experiencing it. Freedom, self-realization, and personal maturity come only from accepting these conditions and from grasping the few comforts that life has to offer. These comforts are in sex which establishes a temporary communication which results in procreation as the only justification for its existence; in art, which distills the products of man's intellect and emotion into another form of communication and self-expression; in a kind of fatalistic semi-religious mysticism, which holds out a remote possibility for an ultimate meaning to the search for knowledge. But all these "comforts" are but palliatives to ease momentarily the inevitable solitude of existence.

This radical phase of existentialism has been severely though not unjustly criticized by the distinguished author and scholar, Joseph Wood Krutch. Writing in the *Saturday Review*, of April 21, 1962, he says: "One of the most persistent assumptions of the human mind has been exactly the opposite (of the existentialist), namely, that there is some sort of logic and meaning to events. Man has always been aware that he could not always discover them but he has tended to assume that this was due to the defect of his mind, not to any meaninglessness in the universe itself.

"Now we are told not only that all the meanings we have ever read into this universe or into human life were figments of the imagination but also that the whole search for them is that famous seeking of a black hat at midnight in a dark cellar, the hat not being there. Wisdom merely consists in knowing that it is not — though presumably we are free to supply its lack by creating out of our own imaginations a hat of whatever color we prefer."

V. THE WAY OUT:

Existentialism is the bitter dregs and lees of a humanism from which has been drained every last drop of what really makes man human, namely, his relation to God. As Sartre expressly claims in his "*l'existentialisme est un humanisme*," his brand of existentialism is "an attempt to extract all the consequences from a coherent atheist position." It is a last futile attempt to deliver man from dread, fear, nausea, from his contingency, from his responsibility flowing from freedom, by his own unaided efforts; the last attempt of man to do without God — an attempt which had its beginnings in the Renaissance and its weird, spotty development throughout the past six hundred years.

EXISTENTIALISM is the philosophy of those who have lost contact with God and man; they are hemmed in within their own finite limits with no insight on other finite beings and no horizon on the infinite. (*Ausweglosigkeit*). The existentialist is by his own confession a helpless victim of dread, of nausea, one who has not faith in this life and no hope for the next; he finds or creates a hell of his own here on earth because "hell" as Sartre says, "is other people;" it is the "closed door" against

faith and hope and charity.

Is there no escape from such a predicament? The professional Existentialists give a formula. "Man," they say, "has to assume himself." If he cannot, then he is advised to accept his fate with a stoical serenity and a proud asceticism after the manner of Henley's "INVICTUS," whose head remained bloody but unbowed "under the bludgeonings of chance."

There must be a better way out of the existential impasse; and there are existentialist philosophers and theologians who seem to think so since we have claimants to the name of Christian existentialism.

For any one who would retain even a vestige of true Christianity there can be only one WAY; the same who is the "TRUTH" and the "LIGHT." In other words the Christian philosopher may indeed stress man's contingency (his creatural status) but he may not make this one true, aspect of man the whole of his philosophy of man. In any form of Christianity there is a counterweight to man's contingency, namely, man's redemption from sin and its consequences and his elevation to the order of grace; his affiliation to God through the Body of the Word-Incarnate.

THIS IS THE CHRISTIAN'S WAY OUT OF THE EXISTENTIALIST IMPASSE. That way is through suffering and the Cross, materially the same suffering that the unbelieving existentialist sees and experiences but merely decries because he finds no reason for it. A little known saint, Vincentia Gerosa, has left us this wise admonition. Says she: "he who has not learnt what the cross means knows nothing; and he who knows the cross has nothing more to learn;" a saying which can reach the lowest level of human understanding and outreach the highest.

ONLY THE NAIVE — in this life — believe that their systems provide all the answers. — *Bruno de Solages*. From "*Christianity and Evolution*," in CROSS CURRENTS (Summer, 1951).