



In the middle of the nineteenth century its main themes had already been worked out by the melancholy Dane Søren Kierkegaard with variations found in the works of Schelling and Marx. That writers with such diverse philosophical orientations should all have become identified with existentialism is an important reminder that existentialism has many forms and that among existentialists there are probably more differences than similarities. Even William James, Bergson, Nietzsche, the German mystic Jacob Böhme, and Pascal must be counted among those who contributed to the existentialist theme. What all these philosophers had in common was a concern about existence, human existence, the conditions and quality of the existing human individual.

Existentialism was bound to happen. The individual had over the centuries been pushed into the background by systems of thought, historical events, and technological forces. The major systems of philosophy had rarely paid attention to the uniquely personal concerns of individuals. Although Aristotle, for example, wrote a major treatise on ethics, Montaigne could say that "I can't recognize most of my daily doings when they appear in Aristotle." Nietzsche also wrote that "to our scholars, strangely enough, the most pressing question does not occur: to what end is their work . . . useful?" To be sure, Socrates had focused attention just these matters with his insistence that all thought and activity should be directed toward enhancing the meaning of human existence. St. Augustine also engaged in profound introspective psychological analysis to discover the source of man's personal insecurity and anxiety. Still, philosophy for the most part dealt with the technical problems of metaphysics, ethics, and the theory of knowledge in a general and objective manner, which bypassed the intimate concerns of men about their personal destiny. Historical events, particularly wars, showed a similar disregard for the feelings and aspirations of individuals. And technology, which arose as an aid to man, soon gathered a momentum of its own, forcing men to fit their lives into the rhythm of machines. Everywhere men were losing their peculiarly human qualities. They were being converted from "persons" into "iron nouns," from "subjects" into "objects," from an "I" into an "it."

Inevitably, dehumanized Western man began to exhibit all the symptoms of his dehumanization. If learning, even philosophy and theology, talked in abstract generalities and skirted around the personal perplexities of individuals, it could be only a question of time before men would conclude that there is no comprehensible meaning for any human being's existence. If wars overwhelmed men despite of their frantic efforts to forestall such calamities, life would be regarded as precarious, ambiguous, and insecure, and man would develop deep anxiety and the feeling of being abandoned in an insensitive and random universe. If technology removed much of the human dimension of existence by harnessing men to machines and requiring them to work as "organization men," men would find fewer occasions for expressing their existence as persons.

Religion, the traditional source of man's sense of worth, meaning, and moral guidance, was itself suffering from the critical impact of rational and scientific thought. Dostoevsky experimented with the implications of a nonreligious

estimate of man, wondering whether one could successfully maintain that "since there is no God, everything is permitted." For Nietzsche, the bankruptcy of religious faith appeared to be the decisive cultural fact of his day. He did not hesitate to proclaim that for all intents and purposes "God is dead." This fact, he urged, should be accepted with courage, and upon it should be built a new conception of human existence. Atheism had become an important cause of the problems that gave rise to existentialism, since the breakdown of the religious tradition of Europe greatly aggravated the growing sense of life's worthlessness and meaninglessness. In their struggle against this meaninglessness, some existentialists took a frankly atheistic position and drew out all the consequences of such a position in formulating their approach to life. Others turned once again to religion in order to rediscover there what they believed had been missed by rational and scientific thinkers.

Whether they were theists or atheists, the existentialists all agreed that traditional philosophy was too academic and remote from life to have any adequate meaning for them. They rejected systematic and schematic thought in favor of a more spontaneous mode of expression in order to capture the authentic concerns of concrete existing individuals. Although there is no "system" of existentialist philosophy, its basic themes can, nevertheless, be discovered in some representative existentialist thinkers.

KIERKEGAARD

Many of the themes of contemporary existentialism were first expressed in the writings of Søren Kierkegaard. Born in Copenhagen in 1813, he spent his short life in a brilliant literary career, producing an extraordinary number of books before his death in 1855 at the age of forty-two. Although his books were soon forgotten after his death, they made an enormous impact upon their rediscovery by some German scholars in the early decades of the twentieth century. At the University of Copenhagen Kierkegaard was trained in Hegel's philosophy and was not favorably impressed by it. When he heard Schelling's lectures at Berlin, which were critical of Hegel, Kierkegaard agreed with this attack upon Germany's greatest speculative thinker. "If Hegel had written the whole of his *Logic* and then said . . . that it was merely an experiment in thought," wrote Kierkegaard, "then he could certainly have been the greatest thinker who ever lived. As it is, he is merely comic." What made Hegel comic for Kierkegaard was that this great philosopher had tried to capture all of reality in his system of thought, yet in the process lost the most important element, namely, *existence*. For Kierkegaard, the term *existence* was reserved for the individual human being. To exist, he said, implies being a certain kind of individual, an individual who strives, who considers alternatives, who chooses, who decides, and who, above all, commits himself. Virtually none of these acts were implied in Hegel's philosophy. Kierkegaard's whole career might well be considered as a self-conscious revolt against

abstract thought and an attempt on his part to live up to Feuerbach's admonition: "Do not wish to be a philosopher in contrast to being a man . . . do not think as a thinker . . . think as a living, real being . . . think in Existence."

To "think in Existence" meant for Kierkegaard to recognize that one is faced with personal choices. Men find themselves constantly in an "existential situation." For this reason, their thinking ought to deal with their own personal situation with a view to coming to terms with the problem of alternatives and choices. Hegel's philosophy falsified man's understanding of reality because it shifted attention away from the concrete individual to the concept of universals. It called upon men to *think* instead of *to be*, to think the Absolute Thought instead of being involved in decisions and commitments. Kierkegaard drew the distinction between the *spectator* and the *actor*, arguing that only the actor is involved in existence. To be sure, the spectator can be said to exist, but the term *existence* does not properly belong to inert or inactive things, whether these be spectators or stones. Kierkegaard illustrated this distinction by comparing two kinds of men in a wagon, one who holds the reins in his hands but is asleep and the other who is fully awake. In the first case, the horse goes along the familiar road without any direction from the sleeping man, whereas in the other case the man is truly a driver. Surely, in one sense it can be said that both men exist, but Kierkegaard insists that *existence* must refer to a quality in the individual, namely, his conscious participation in an act. Only the conscious driver exists, and so, too, only a person who is engaged in conscious activity of will and choice can be truly said to exist. Thus, while both the spectator and the actor exist in a sense, only the actor is involved in existence.

Kierkegaard's criticism of rational knowledge was severe. He revolted against the rational emphasis in Greek wisdom, which, he charged, had permeated subsequent philosophy and Christian theology. His specific argument was that Greek philosophy had been too greatly influenced by a high regard for mathematics. Although he did not want to reject either mathematics or science in their proper uses, he did reject the assumption that the mode of thought characteristic of science could be successfully employed when trying to understand human nature. Mathematics and science have no place for the human individual, only for the general, the universal. Likewise, Platonic philosophy emphasizes the universal, the Form, the True, the Good. Plato's whole assumption was that if one *knew* the Good he would do it. Kierkegaard thought that such an approach to ethics was a falsification of man's real predicament. What Kierkegaard wanted to underscore was that even when a person has knowledge, he is still in the predicament of having to make a decision. The grand formulations of philosophical systems are, in the long run, only prolonged detours, which eventually come to nothing unless they lead attention back once again to the individual. To be sure, there are problems that can be solved by mathematics and science as well as by ethics and metaphysics. But over against such universal or general problems stands life, each person's life, making demands upon the individual, and at these critical moments general and abstract thought do not help. Kierkegaard saw in the Biblical story of Abraham the typical condition of man: and "God did tempt

Abraham and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, here I am. And he said, take now thy son, thine only son, Isaac, whom thou lovest." What kind of knowledge can help Abraham decide whether to obey God, to sacrifice his son? The most poignant moments in life are personal, where the individual becomes aware of himself as a subject. This subjective element is obscured if not denied by rational thought, which considers only man's objective characteristics, those characteristics that *all* men have in common. But subjectivity is what makes up each person's unique existence. For this reason, objectivity cannot give the whole truth about the individual self. That is why rational, mathematical, and scientific thought are incapable of guiding man to genuine existence.

Truth, said Kierkegaard, is subjectivity. By this strange notion he meant that for existing, striving, deciding persons there is not available "out there" a prefabricated truth. Anticipating the pragmatic view of William James, who said that "truth is made" by an act of will, Kierkegaard wrote that what is "out there" is "an objective uncertainty"; he argued that "the highest truth attainable for an Existing individual" is simply "an objective uncertainty held fast in the most passionate personal experience. . . ." Whatever may have been his criticism of Plato, he did nevertheless find in Socrates' claim to ignorance a good example of this notion of truth, saying that "the Socratic ignorance which Socrates held fast with the entire passion of his personal experience, was thus an expression of the principle that the eternal truth is related to the Existing individual." This would suggest that the cultivation of the mind is not the only important or decisive thing in life. Of more consequence is the development and maturity of personality.

In describing man's *existential situation*, Kierkegaard distinguished between man's present estate, that is, what he now is, and what he *ought* to be, or what he is *essentially*. There is, says Kierkegaard, a movement in the life of man from his *essential* to his *existential* condition, a movement from *essence* to *existence*. The traditional explanation of this movement in theology is made in terms of the doctrine of sin, of the Fall. Kierkegaard translated this doctrine into a profound psychological analysis, in which he isolated man's anxiety over his own finitude as the cause of his estrangement or alienation from his essential being. Sensing his insecurity and finitude, a person tries to "do something" to overcome his finitude, and invariably what he does only aggravates his problem by adding guilt and despair to his anxiety. Kierkegaard has in mind throughout his analysis the Christian understanding of man. Man's *essential* nature entails his relation to God, the infinite. His *existential* condition is a consequence of his alienation from God. If, then, a person's actions drive him even further from God, his alienation and despair are compounded. This is why it is not of any help to lose oneself in a crowd. Whatever be the nature of a crowd or collectivity, whether rich or poor or political in makeup, or even a congregation in a church—in every case, says Kierkegaard, "a crowd in its very concept is the untruth, by reason of the fact that it renders the individual completely impenitent and irresponsible, or at least weakens his sense of responsibility by reducing it to a fraction." Being in a crowd, in short, unmakes one's nature as an individual by diluting the self. From

the point of view of Christian faith, being thus immersed in a crowd appears as an attempt upon man's part to derive some meaning for his existence. But this is a wrong attempt, for "to relate oneself to God is a far higher thing than to be related to" any other thing, whether a person, race, or even church. Until man does actualize his essential self in God, says Kierkegaard, his life is full of anxiety. His anxiety is caused by his awareness, however obscure, of a deep alienation of his existential from his essential self. This alienation creates in man a dynamic drive to recover his essential self. In describing this dynamic movement, Kierkegaard speaks of the "stages on life's way."

Kierkegaard's analysis of the "three stages" represents a sharp contrast to Hegel's theory of the gradual development of a person's self-consciousness. Whereas Hegel expounded the dialectic movement of the mind as it moves from one stage of intellectual awareness to another through the process of thinking, Kierkegaard described the movement of the self from one level of existence to another through an act of will, an act of choice. Hegel's dialectic moves gradually toward a knowledge of the universal, whereas Kierkegaard's dialectic involves the progressive actualization of the individual. Whereas Hegel overcomes the antithesis by a conceptual act, Kierkegaard overcomes it by the act of personal commitment.

The first stage in this dialectic process, says Kierkegaard, is the *aesthetic stage*. At this level, a person behaves according to his impulses and emotions. Although he is not simply sensual at this stage, he is for the most part governed by his senses. For this reason, the aesthetic person knows nothing of any universal moral standards. He has no specific religious belief. His chief motivation is a desire to enjoy the widest variety of pleasures of the senses. His life has no principle of limitation except his own taste; he resents anything that would limit his vast freedom of choice. At this stage an individual can exist inasmuch as he deliberately chooses to be an aesthetic man. But even though existence can be achieved at this level, Kierkegaard injects the element of *quality* into the matter of existence. Later existentialists were to speak of this quality in terms of *authenticity*. That is, an individual on the aesthetic level is aware, notwithstanding his variety of sense experiences, that his life consists, or *ought* to consist, of more than his emotive and sense experiences. Kierkegaard distinguishes between man's capacity to be *spirit* on the one hand and *sensuousness* on the other, calling the first the *building* and the second the *cellar*. Man, he says, "prefers to dwell in the cellar." To be able to make this distinction about someone else is one thing, but for each individual to have an awareness of these two possibilities within himself is what triggers the dialectic movement in the individual. The antithesis of the sensual drive is the lure of the spirit. In experience, this conflict produces anxiety and despair when the individual discovers that he is in fact living in the "cellar" but that life at this level cannot possibly produce his *authentic* self, cannot result in *true existence*. The individual is now face to face with an *either-or*; either he remains on the aesthetic level with its fatal attractions, whose limitations he knows, or he moves to the next stage. This transition, says Kierkegaard,

cannot be made by thinking alone but must be achieved by making a decision, or by an act of will, by a commitment.

The second level is the *ethical stage*. Unlike the aesthetic man, who has no universal standards but only his own taste, the ethical man does recognize and accept rules of conduct that reason formulates. Moral rules give the ethical man's life the elements of form and consistency. Moreover, the ethical man accepts the limitations upon his life that moral responsibility imposes. Kierkegaard illustrates the contrast between the aesthetic man and the ethical man in their attitude toward sexual behavior, saying that whereas the former yields to his impulses wherever there is an attraction, the ethical man accepts the obligations of marriage as an expression of reason, the universal reason of man. If Don Juan exemplifies the aesthetic man, it is Socrates who typifies the ethical man or the reign of the universal moral law. The ethical man has the mood of moral self-sufficiency; he takes a firm stand on moral questions and, as Socrates argued, assumes that to know the good is to do the good. For the most part, the ethical man considers moral evil as being a product either of ignorance or of weakness of will. But the time comes, says Kierkegaard, when the dialectic process begins to work in the consciousness of the ethical man. He begins to realize that he is involved in something more profound than an inadequate knowledge of the moral law or insufficient strength of will. He is, in short, doing something more serious than merely making mistakes. The ethical man ultimately comes to realize that he is in fact incapable of fulfilling the moral law, that he deliberately violates that law and therefore he becomes conscious of his guilt. Guilt, or the sense of sin, says Kierkegaard, becomes the dialectic element, the antithesis, which places before man a new *either-or*. Now he must either remain at the ethical level and try to fulfill the moral law, or he must respond to his new awareness, the awareness of his own finitude and estrangement from God to whom he belongs and from whom he must derive his strength. Again, man's movement from the ethical to the next stage cannot be achieved by thinking alone but by an act of commitment, by a *leap* of faith.

The difference between faith and reason is particularly striking for Kierkegaard when man arrives at the third level, or the *religious stage*. Man's movement from the aesthetic to the ethical level required an act of choice and commitment; it ushered man into the presence of reason inasmuch as the moral law is an expression of the universal reason of man. But the movement from the ethical to the religious level is quite different. The leap of faith does not bring one into the presence of a God who can be philosophically or rationally described as the Absolute and Knowable Truth (and therefore objective) but into the presence of a Subject. The secret of religious consciousness, says Kierkegaard, is that the existing individual cannot pursue God in an "objective way," or "bring God to light objectively." This, says Kierkegaard, "is in all eternity impossible because God is subject, and therefore exists only for subjectivity in inwardness." At the ethical level, it is possible for the existing individual to give his life, as Socrates did, for the moral law that he rationally understands. But when it is a question of

man's relation to God, there is available no rational or conceptual or objective knowledge about this relationship. The relationship between God and each individual is a unique and subjective experience. There is no way, prior to the actual relationship, to get any knowledge about it. Any attempt to get such objective knowledge about it is, says Kierkegaard, entirely an *approximation process*. Only an act of faith can assure the existing individual of his personal relation to God. That he must find his self-fulfillment in God becomes clear to him as he discovers the inadequacy of his existence at the aesthetic and ethical levels. Through despair and guilt he is brought to the decisive moment in life when he confronts the final *either-or* of faith. The existence of God is suggested to man in his awareness of his self-alienation, that subjective awareness of the contrast between his existential and his essential self. That God has disclosed Himself in Christ is a further complication, indeed a *paradox*. To say, as Christian faith does, that God, the infinite, is revealed in Christ, the finite, is an extraordinary affront to human reason, "to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness." But Kierkegaard wanted to maintain that the only way to cross the span between man and God, that "infinite qualitative distinction between time and eternity," is not through speculative reason, not even Hegel's, but through faith. Again, truth for Kierkegaard was a subjective matter, a consequence of commitment. Without risk, said Kierkegaard, there is no faith. And with faith, the existing individual realizes his true self.

Kierkegaard's existentialism can be summed up in his statement that: "Every human being must be assumed in essential possession of what essentially belongs to being a man." This being the case, "the task of the subjective thinker is to transform himself into an instrument that clearly and definitely expresses in existence whatever is essentially human." This is Kierkegaard's central point, namely, that each person possesses an essential self, which he *ought* to actualize. This essential self is fixed by the very fact that man must inescapably become related to God. To be sure, man can *exist* at any one of the three stages along life's way. But the experience of despair and guilt creates in man an awareness of qualitative differences in various modes of existence, that some modes of human existence are more authentic than others. But arriving at authentic existence is not a matter of the intellect; it is a matter of faith and commitment, a continuous process of choice by the existing individual in the presence of varieties of *either-or*.

HUSSERL'S PHENOMENOLOGY

A major source of contemporary existentialism is the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl. The connection between existentialism and phenomenology is not always obvious since so much of Husserl's philosophy is cast in technical and even special scientific language, whereas existentialism focuses upon the immediate human concerns of man's daily existence. Phenomenology is rationalistic whereas existentialism is concerned with such practical issues as making choices, decisions, and personal commitments. Moreover, a significant element in Husserl's

phenomenology is the act of detachment, of standing back from the realm of experienced existence in order to understand it, whereas existentialism urges a life of thorough-going engagement and involvement as the surest way of creating meaning for human existence. Although there are these and other differences between existentialism and phenomenology, it is the spectacular spread of existentialism that has brought Husserl's thought before a wider audience. Husserl can rightly be called the "father" of phenomenology, but he is also the first in a line of thinkers who together encompass many modes of existentialism and phenomenology. Among those influenced by Husserl's insights in various ways were the philosophers Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre.

Edmund Husserl was born in the Moravian province of Prossnitz in 1859, the same year in which were born Henri Bergson and John Dewey. After his early education in that province, he went to the University of Leipzig where during 1876 to 1878 he studied physics, astronomy and mathematics and found time to attend lectures by the philosopher Wilhelm Wundt. Husserl continued his studies at the Friederich Wilhelm University in Berlin and later, in 1881, he went to the University of Vienna where, in 1883, he earned his Ph.D. for his dissertation on "Contributions to the Theory of the Calculus of Variations." During 1884 to 1886, he attended the lectures of Franz Brentano (1838-1917) who became a most significant influence in Husserl's philosophical development especially through his lectures on Hume and John Stuart Mill and his treatment of problems in ethics, psychology, and logic. On Brentano's advice, Husserl went to the University of Halle where in 1886 he became an assistant under Carl Stumpf (1884-1936), the eminent psychologist under whose direction he wrote his first book, *Philosophy of Arithmetic* (1891). His *Logical Investigations* appeared in 1900 and in the same year he was invited to join the philosophy faculty at the University of Göttingen. It was here that Husserl spent sixteen productive years writing such important works as his *Lectures on Phenomenology* (1904-1905), *Lectures on Phenomenology of Inner Time Consciousness* (1905-1910), *The Idea of Phenomenology* (1906-1907), *Philosophy as a Rigorous Science* (1911) and the first volume of his *Ideas* (1913). In 1916 Husserl became a full professor at Freiburg where he taught until 1928. Here he wrote the last two volumes of his *Ideas* (1912-), *First Philosophy* (1923-), *Phenomenological Psychology* (1925-) and *Formal and Transcendental Logic* (1928). In 1928 Husserl applied for retirement. Then, between 1929 and 1936 he published two major works, *Cartesian Meditations* (1931) and the first part of his book *Philosophy and the Crisis of European Man* (1936). Because of his Jewish origins, Husserl was forbidden to participate in academic activities after 1933. Although he was offered a professorship by the University of Southern California, Husserl declined the offer, and after several months of suffering, he died of pleurisy at the age of 79 in 1938 at Freiburg in Breisgau.

Husserl's philosophy evolved gradually through several phases. His early interest was in logic and mathematics; next, he developed an early version of phenomenology focused chiefly upon a theory of knowledge; then, he moved on to a view of phenomenology as a universal foundation for philosophy and sci-