



Existentialism Positively Characterized

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Walter Kaufmann has edited a book about Existentialism.¹ In this work he has carefully chosen a plethora of authors, all of whom, with the exception of J.-P. Sartre, are adamantly opposed to the label of "existentialism" for their thought. Nevertheless Dr. Kaufmann has in fact positioned them under the heading of "existentialists." Excepting Dostoevsky and Camus, whom Kaufmann employs as the overture and the postlude of the symphonic strains of individualism he has collected,

each of the thinkers, he posits, can normally be united under such a heading. What then is his understanding of "existentialism"?

Early in the book he is careful to offer us a list of what he considers the characteristics of existentialism: "The refusal to belong to any school of thought, the repudiation of the adequacy of any body of beliefs whatever, and especially of systems, and a marked dissatisfaction with traditional philosophy as superficial, academic, and remote from life—that is the heart of existentialism." (p. 12) Besides noting that Kaufmann is very much a disciple of Kierkegaard and that this association of unanimity colors his description of existentialism with Kierkegaardian tones, we might still have a question. How may such diverse thinkers as the atheist Sartre and the committed Christian Kierkegaard fall under the same title? How could Heidegger be categorized with Marcel? The answer is simple. As Kaufmann legitimately conceives the heading of "existentialism" to be a collective term covering a number of negative descriptions, such a grouping is possible. His heading is a negative description of characteristics, of reactions, repudiations and revolts. In a similar fashion, one could collect an immense number of writings under the general title of "non-poetry," a large number of people under the heading of "non-garbage," and many drinks under the stunning title, "non-beer!"

Although we do not wish to disparage Mr. Kaufmann's scholarship and intent, we would suggest that, as a consequence of this negative description, he has missed the whole point. Naturally some defense of this contention will appear in the pages that follow. It is sufficient to note here that to think in "reaction" to someone else's ideas, in "revolt" against some traditional system is to invite error. Such reactions may indeed be necessary, and have been, but often they tend to lead to oneness in the other extreme to which a later thinker reacts. This is true for negative descriptions as well. If we define a classification negatively the more important men will be the thinkers who reacted the most, while the truly positive contributions, more lasting contributions, are given second place. This, we fear, is the impression gleaned from Kaufmann's collection. Sartre and Nietzsche stand out as favorites while the thought of Heidegger, truly original and creative, is played down.

Although "existentialist" thought could positively be characterized as an attempt to bring philosophy into daily life thereby attaining an eminently practical and ethical tone, we would suggest that behind the "ethics" in each thinker there is a deeper characteristic. This more

profound but positive characteristic is a metaphysical concern. It is this concern which unites all of the philosophers collected in Kaufmann's book, but is found most explicitly in Heidegger. Each man treats this deeper concern differently, giving it a personal or social or psychological touch within the structure of his own thought.

The metaphysical concern is this: the individual man's concern about the "non-being," the death, of either himself or his society. Here we discover the ancient question about Being permeating all of the thought-patterns; as Shakespeare asks: "To be or not to be. That is the question!" We think this is the positive characteristic which Kaufmann missed, hence it would be well to examine each of the men included in the book briefly to see how this suggested concern takes on its own individuality.

But at the start we must face an objection. The question of to be or not to be is actually not a distinguishing feature or attribute of the thinkers collected by Kaufmann. After all, was not Parmenides concerned about non-being at the dawn of thought; wasn't Socrates pre-eminently a philosopher of choice? Did not Aristotle and St. Thomas insist that the judgment of contradiction (Being is not Non-Being) is basic to all thought and action?

It is true that these concerns are found in the philosophies and outlooks of these men and this fact indicates the continuity of philosophical thought through time. Yet in fact, Parmenides was not *personally* concerned. That is, his reflection did not rise out of personal reflection upon himself as a man. Socrates seemed more concerned with the choice between this good being, and that better being. For him there was no question about not-being as both his life and death taught us. When he died he remained convinced he would become a better being, not non-being or nothing. Like Parmenides, Aristotle was not personally concerned in the way described in *Hamlet's* question.

What clues do we have in the modern authors that their concern with non-being is more personal? First of all we have their background. Philosophy has been in-ward directed ever since Descartes.² Secondly, we are convinced that the concern about non-being lies at the ground of each of the ideas advanced by the "existentialists" because of their continual emphasis upon the free-will of each man to make his own destiny, whatever it be. Underlying the emphasis upon free-will is the more primal recognition of the *fact* of free-will which could cause so much disturbance (Angst).³ Let us call such a recognition, consciousness. Consciousness (as opposed to awareness alone) is

that aspect of man which makes him a man and not an animal. It is in the activity of consciousness that man, and man alone, must confront the possibility of his own non-being or that of his society, and choose in what way he is to avoid or indeed accept it! Consequently the question of to be or not to be is grounded in consciousness, in the personal concern of the individual about his own nihilistic demise or that of his environment precisely as his own.

Now what does each of the thinkers in the Kaufmann collection say about this? Dostoevsky, conducting the overture, trumpets the theme: "I swear, gentlemen, that to be too conscious is an illness—a real thoroughgoing illness." (p. 56) Why would consciousness, the very thing that makes a man a man, be termed an illness? Precisely because to be aware, to be conscious of the possibility of the non-being of that very consciousness constitutes the grossest insult to man and to his values. (See Rilke) Consequently, each thinker will propose some way of effacing this "dread consciousness," depending upon the context of his discovery of this no-alternative, anxiety-filled consciousness. In the single instances, each proposal represents an act of the WILL in carving out some form, whether ethical, psychological, metaphysical or religious, of being in the marble of non-being. In short, only man has to worry about non-being. To parody the T.V. advertisement: "No other creature can make this statement!"

Dostoevsky's character in *Notes from Underground* recognizes the aimlessness of suffering. Here is the problem of non-being in the guise of the eventual worthlessness of suffering. The man's choice is to alleviate the suffering only by making others suffer with him, by making others miserable by his complaints.⁴ But as we said, this is only the overture. Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Jaspers bite right into the matter. As Jaspers says of the former two: "They saw before them Nothingness." (p. 167) He does as well. They both affirmed "a will toward the substance of Being." (p. 167) He does too. All three recognize through consciousness the "perhapsness" of their Being. By reflection they can either become the nothingness which they so boldly face, or create for themselves some permanence. Kierkegaard wills Faith as Being for man; Nietzsche wills power as Being for man; Jaspers chooses the possibility of a transcendent which will make man solid, a one, in short, Being. In all three cases, once consciousness demands a choice between being and non-being, the Will takes over to create Being. In this way the interest in psychology and ethics flows from the personal decision in the face of some sort of non-being, a

personal decision which lies at the root of their philosophies. The point of decision, then, is like the cocoon. Man reaches the point when he must break out of it or die. In either choice there is uncertainty. In both choices man will change his Being. If he chooses to "die," chooses despair or non-being, the cocoon will be his tomb. If he chooses to break out, he will emerge with a new Being. Similar to the transformation of the larvae into butterflies of great beauty, man choosing Being will be able to fly from "perhapsness" to the certitude of transcendence.

Rilke, Kafka, and Camus serve as examples in the concrete of just such decisions facing us daily. Rilke's Nikolai Kuzmich experiences subjectively his own contingency, the very possibility of his own non-being. His choice, unlike the triumvirate mentioned above, was to will an escape from facing the non-being directly. He took to his bed and time, like a cold draft, became offensive to him! Franz Kafka, unusually difficult to interpret, does treat of one central thesis in his works—the bewilderment of man in the face of the social conventions and institutions which often appear so "natural" to others.⁵ Since these conventions are non-being in respect to man in the guise of permanence, man often chooses them. Hence, Kafka's favorite word, the result of this faulty choice: "Betrogen! betrayed!" (*Landarzt*). In the selection offered by Kaufmann, the castle represents society and its structures impede the communication of any messages, however important, between men. Through the fault of society, a permanent "inzwischen," an in-between abides between men. Kafka's forceful message to us is to warn us not to choose this faulty alternative of social conventions and red tape for it is only another example of non-being. Camus presents us with a man whom he thinks has chosen rightly: "A face that toils so close to stones is already stone itself!" (p. 314) Sisyphus, or every man, has chosen his human life, created it out of a series of unrelated events, and sealed it by death; it becomes *his* thing, his stone, his permanence, his own Being.

Sartre, it seems, has transposed Heidegger's insights into ethical concerns; i.e., he has substituted evil for non-being. But first let us look at Heidegger himself. Heidegger explicitly treats of this pre-metaphysical question, the question of to be or not to be. Similar to the other thinkers represented in this volume, the German "black-forester" poses the question in the context of man's own reflection into the depths of his own existence. Let us take as a verification of what has been called that "delightful" passage (p. 214): "Man is that

being whose Being is distinguished by the open-standing standing-in the unconcealedness of Being. . . ." "Open-standing" means exactly what is meant in this paper by consciousness, the common characteristic of all thinkers in the volume. It means the self-reflective care about non-being. "Standing-in" indicates what all things that are have in common . . . that they are; they are in Being. It is only man who is open-standing, however. He is the only one who is conscious of To-Be, of Being, of beings, and of the possibility of not-being.⁶ The "unconcealedness of Being" is Truth to which man opens himself and in which he immerses himself. Authentic existence, then, occurs for man ONLY when he is open-standing, when he is conscious of alternatives and not determined by cultural values but open simply to the revelation of Truth.

Sartre enunciates the same concern in less obtruse terms and with a more ethical bent, yet underlying his views is that same metaphysical problem for the existent man. There are also for Sartre two kinds of things that are: Being-for-Itself, and Being-in-Itself. "For-Itself" wants to become as solid as "In-Itself." It wants to become totally Being without the recognition through consciousness of what it might be not to be.⁷ Sartre concretizes his feeling that conscious Being is a curse by having Tom, one of the condemned in *The Wall*, touch the bench in amazement (the bench being nothing else than Being-in-Itself). His companion muses: "It was *his* death which Tom had just touched on the bench." (p. 235) Tom was choosing Being-in-Itself.

Whatever the validity of the negative characteristics which Kaufmann lists we would say that the existentialist remains characterized by his personal, self-reflective concern about his own non-being, or that of his society. No matter what the appearance of the froth and foam of his examples, the worry about not-being, like the powerful current, is never far from the surface of the sea of his insights.

FOOTNOTES

¹ *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (New York: Meridian, 1965). (Pages quoted in the text of this paper refer to this edition.)

² Alexander Koyre in his *From Closed World to Infinite Universe* places the turning point from out to in-wardness in philosophy in the discovery of the telescope by Galileo. This was the first time, he contends, that man had an inkling that his senses were not to be trusted. From then on, he became concerned about verifying his knowledge and turned for this verification within himself.

³ How much of this disturbance and psychological suffering is due to the recognition of one's own contingency and how much is due to original sin?

⁴ This choice of alternatives was the very one which Dostoevsky would negate in all his subsequent writings by impressing us with the *value* of suffering out of Christian love.

⁵ The "social-critique" aspect of Kafka's writings is brought out well by Josef Mühlberger in his *Introduction* to be found in: Franz Kafka, *Die Kaiserliche Botschaft* (Graz u. Wien: Stiasny Bücherei, 1960), pp. 5-28.

⁶ The problem of the non-being and of death which is written into the very scroll of man's life and encounters is treated extensively by Heidegger in *Sein und Zeit*.

⁷ Sartre considers consciousness to be non-being itself and that which causes the non-solidity of Being-for-Itself. Quentin Lauer, S.J., attributes this striking interpretation of consciousness (we would think it to be the real meat of Being, *not* non-being!) to a conclusion Sartre drew from Husserl's identification of all Being with that which was constituted by consciousness. If, as Husserl contended, consciousness itself is not constituted, then it would follow that it must be non-being. See: Lauer, *Phenomenology: Its Genesis and Prospects* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965), p. 69.

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