Existential Ethics and Christian Morals

by John B. Davis, O.P.

Perhaps no area of philosophy today has the wide attention given ethical theory. Problems of our time are increasingly seen to focus on the human dimension of reality, on the value of man, his freedoms and responsibilities. Within the Christian churches, larger demands are being made on moral theologians for insights which will correlate with new scriptural evidence and the themes developed by philosophers of existential and/or phenomenological orientation. There is growing feeling that Christian ethical teaching can respond in contemporary categories to our present situation if only we heed the perspectives these continental thinkers have set before us.

The actual task of linking the heritage of Christian ethical doctrine with recent philosophical approaches is proceeding slowly. Among the most notable attempts in this direction is Fr. Van Der Marck's *Toward a Christian Ethic,* which appeared in English Translation last year. The previous year saw general critical approval of Fr. Curran's *Christian Morality Today* and Fr. Häring's *Toward a Christian Moral Theology.* No one, least of all the authors, would deny the tentative nature of these studies. The titles themselves indicate that moral theology and contemporary moral or ethical philosophy are starting to converge. The philosophical posture so readily dubbed "existential" is elusive in origin, however, and does not permit easy systematizing. A preliminary understanding of the themes brought into philosophy by Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Sartre and Heidegger is needed and a comparison with value theory ethics or axiology, might supply a starting point. Although philosophical terms are notoriously vague, value theory will be taken here for the purposes of contrast with existential ethics as covering any philosophical search for clear norms in regulating man's properly human activity. Axiological systems strive to chart personal action along a course which they conceive as determined by man's nature. Although we may think immediately of the theories of human happiness fostered by Greek philosophy, value theory can be expanded to include Mill's utilitarianism, Ralph Barton Perry's general interest theory and John Dewey's reflective desire ethics.

A fundamental difference between value theory and existential

lberto Giacometti — Walking Quickly Under the Rain
Detail). 1949 Bronze. The Museum of Modern Art, New York
ollection: Mr. and Mrs. Gordon Bunshaft

analysis is the obvious one that the former emphasizes *value*, while the latter stresses what might be called *disvalue*, namely preoccupations with dread, self-deception, death and guilt. These experiences are common to all men and cannot be excluded from ordinary life. For most existential thinkers—and we refer here especially to Heidegger—these phenomena will have moral import of the first order; they may be confronted and reacted to either authentically or inauthentically. If there is minimal consensus among existential ethicists, it is at this level: man's freedom within his life situation is not only a desirable quality but one which is inescapable and, paradoxically, limiting. Freedom is as much a judgment and condemnation as it is a blessing. The Nobel laureate Albert Camus' "wager" of the absurd uniquely reflects this attitude and Sartre's dictum that freedom in human relations is hell explicates it.

Much of Kierkegaard's ethical thought revolves around this pressing reality called freedom. In *Sickness Unto Death* he describes the self as freedom. "But freedom", he notes, "is the dialectical element in terms of possibility and necessity."[1] This placing of freedom at the core of human existence, or the near identity of self with freedom also received support from Nietzsche. The true spirit, at once happy and unhappy, is the spirit free from other persons, from love of country, from sympathy and from science.[2] It is intriguing to note how a similar stress on the importance of human risk by two thinkers can lead to diverse conclusions. While Kierkegaard stands side by side with Nietzsche in rebelling against hypocrisy, insincerity and the superficial man, the Dane had radical commitment to his own interpretation of New Testament faith. Nietzsche would have us transcend all existing religious and ethical doctrines. For him disvalue could enhance the greatness of man: "violence, slavery . . . everything wicked, terrible, tyrannical, predatory and serpentine in man, serves as well for the elevation of the human race as its opposite."[3] Both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche proclaim that they are not interested in any universal normative principles, or in establishing permanent boundaries for the rightness of human actions. Nor indeed is this possible. "My opinion is my opinion", says Nietzsche in *Beyond Good and Evil,* "another person has not easily a right to it . . . Good is no longer good when one's neighbor takes it into his mouth."[4] For Kierkegaard systematic ethics tends to reduce human conduct to the level of the crowd. But the crowd represents untruth; truth resides in the individual, grows out of personal decision and initiative and never goes beyond its creator.

Agamemnon and Abraham

If we can point to Kierkegaard as the founder of the existential ethical posture and consider later philosophers as developers of his insights in non-theistic and non-Christian directions, then the Copenhagen hunchback's comparison of the Greek Agamemnon and the Jew Abraham will be central to this type of ethic. For sacrificing his daughter Iphigenia in order the save a nation the world would want Agamemnon proclaimed a hero. The Greek, while torn between his personal love for the girl and his civil duty, chooses the universal norm of duty. On the other hand Abraham is the true knight of ethical crisis. He must act without the consolation of fulfilling either the demands of feeling or duty. Instead of saving a nation by sacrificing his son, he is asked to give up both by making a holocaust of the child through whom all the nations of the world were, in his understanding to be saved. From this irony Kierkegaard draws the conclusion that ethical action must be situational and that no ethical theory can lay down principles as safe guides for conduct. Somewhat the same approach is espoused by his fellow Protestant Emil Brunner for whom "there can be no ethical law book, no isolated duties, no pre-arranged cases, for love is 'occasionalist' and free from all this pre-definition."[5] In *The Divine Imperative* he warns that by itself "ethics can decide nothing beforehand, nothing at all".[6] Both these Christians see reason as moribund before the plight of the believer's conscience.

It cannot be ignored that much existential moralizing has taken place in the absence of belief in God. Yet it is difficult to enter this worldview without finding a sort of *via negativa* for the Judaic-Christian religious tradition. These ethicists return constantly to some serious depravity at the root of human existence. Some theologians have found these musings a convenient place to begin the construction of a theology of sin and grace which will speak to an age which considers the intangible to be imaginary. The late Paul Tillich saw in existential gropings a useful opening for the contemporary theologian:

> . . . the existentialist raises the question and analyzes the human situation to which the theologian can then give the answer, an answer not given from the question but from somewhere else, and not from the human situation itself.[7]

It seems fair to say that Heidegger's and Sartre's phenomenological treatments of nothingness stem from their rejection of any essential nature of man, or at least of any force which stands beyond rather than within him. They avoid speaking of nature and also of goodness

or evil as these qualities might indicate some essential basis for man's activities in the ethical realm. Although Heidegger continues to keep silence on the subject of God in his writings, Sartre has been quite explicit about his atheism. The consequences surface in his moral thought: God is a costly and useless hypothesis and man must learn to live without reference to such a notion. All normative, or as he calls it, *a priori* morality is simply God under a new guise. Sartre's position goes beyond the rejection of rational bases for ethical systems. He finds it necessary to dismiss feelings of rightness and wrongness as equally inconclusive. Apparently he would have no truck with the ethics developed by the logical positivists, for example, with A. J. Ayer's emotive theory in either its early or late formulations. Although it may be argued that Sartre—the only thinker who acknowledges the title "existentialist"—has more in common with Ayer's position than he realizes, his critique of emotive ethics has a value we might consider:

> feeling is formed by the acts that one performs; so, I can not refer to it in order to act upon it. Which means that I can neither seek within myself the true condition which will compel me to act, nor apply to a system of ethics for concepts which will permit me to act.[8]

Man as Rabbit in the Laboratory of Existence

A basic fear of normative ethics pervades existential thought. How can man follow a standard which is set from outside his own person and not assume the role of mimic? Karl Jaspers quotes Kierkegaard with approval in *Reason and Existenz*: "In the human sense, no one can imitate me. I am a man as he might become in a crisis, an experimental rabbit, so to speak, for existence".[9] It is this devotion to the experimental or to a quasi-scientific method which links existential analysis to phenomenology. Under the impetus of Edmund Husserl's all-out effort at the beginning of this century to explore an entirely new direction in philosophy, this technique became the methodology of later existential thinkers. The exact relationship of phenomenology, solely as a procedure or even as a distinct philosophy has yet to be worked out by scholars.[10] This much is clear at present: at one of its fundamental levels, phenomenology is concerned with description, i.e., with whatever presents itself to consciousness for observation. Because existential thought discards the possibility of essential and unvarying natures, its examination of human activity must rely on the description of psychic phenomena. Underlying this method, is the hope that careful observation of man and his responses will reveal him

as he truly exists. Throughout its short life, phenomenology has been challenged as a pure subjectivity incapable of yielding scientific results. Husserl and those who followed him closely vigorously denied this. At any rate, the goal of scientific subjectivity and total description of the individual has met with severe reservation on the part of axiologists.

To use William James' phrase there may be need to unstiffen some of our ethical theories, but can a complete break with traditional norms of behavior benefit the community of man? The effort to be scientific in moral matters, through a phenomenological or any other methodology, should result in universal truth rather than in individual truth. Can an ethical approach which begins and must remain within the existence of the person adequately meet the needs of interpersonal situations? It has been claimed by some that Martin Buber's I-Thou theme offers a foundation for a valid existential ethics. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that his insight is not an existentialist deduction, but a reaction against it, albeit from within its framework.

The very search for a true-to-self ethic reveals an impulse in man to lay hold of some organized and coherent *Weltgeist*. In existential ethics this impulse is evident—despite announced intentions—in the constant request that man turn from fallenness to authenticity, from despair to faith, no matter how absurd the effort may seem. In its concern with individual human existence, existential analysis has neglected to emphasize that the self must return to an approximation of responsible living with others. To champion Kierkegaard's efforts on behalf of the individual in an age when technology and urban life threatens to depersonalize man deserves praise. Yet a horror of the crowd and of mindless conformity to norms which "the others" accept is not new. It did not have to await Kierkegaard's critiques of Copenhagen society and Heidegger's analysis of *das Man*. The Greek tradition of moral moderation had already insisted that an unexamined life is not worth living.

After describing the human situation with its interwoven joy and grief, a meaningful ethic must go on to place the person in the midst of a human community which does not require his existence for its continuity. In spite of this truth—and at first it can stun one who took his own existence for granted—the reality of societal networks must not be denied. The community needs the efforts of each person for continual reconstruction. Although the axiologists will make various responses to this demand, some will not appeal to the Christian believer. Nevertheless we are free to accept what truth there is in the

value theorists' demand for common concern and combine it with the valid insight of existential ethics; thus: "I need not be, but I am and I am with others".

The Orientation of Christian Morality

The Christian has much to gain from contrasting the emphases of existential and normative ethics. The existential thinkers make us aware that a philosophical theory stressing some one value is often less than relevant to a particular crisis. Value theory ethics presuppose a favorable climate in which the value sought can be realized. But if the situation is radically altered then the criteria for values will often be adjusted accordingly. In their *Counseling the Catholic*, Frs. Hagmaier and Gleason offered a distinction between conceptual and evaluative knowledge to account for this situation in moral problems.[11] It must be granted further that under the most favorable conditions, value theory ethics remain quite speculative. Because of this, these theories can be creative in a way existential analysis cannot. On the other hand, an axiology will always tend towards absolutism in asserting a single value as comprehensive. Religious faith will bring the differences into focus by evaluating value theory as theory without sin and existential ethics as ethics without grace. Nor should we expect more from philosophy.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and Sickness Unto Death,* translated by Walter Lowrie (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1954), p. 162.

[2] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil,* translated by Helen Zimmern (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1942), p. 49.

[3] *Ibid.,* page 52.

[4] *Ibid.,* page 50.

[5] Emil Brunner, *The Divine Imperative, translated by Olive Wyon* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1947), page 134.

[6] *Ibid.,* page 139.

[7] Paul Tillich, *A Theology of Culture,* edited by Robert Kimball (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), page 125.

[8] Jean Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions,* translated by Bernard Frechtman (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1957), page 22.

[9] Karl Jaspers, *Reason and Existenz,* translated by William Earle, (New York: The Noonday Press, 1957), page 4.

[10] The question is discussed at length by Herbert Spiegelberg and William Earle in *The Journal of Philosophy,* Vol. LVII, No. 2 (January 21, 1960). Spiegelberg suggests there can be a limited interplay between the two philosophies while Earle is much less optimistic.

[11] George Hagmaier, C.S.P. and Robert W. Gleason, S.J., *Counseling the Catholic* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1959), page 124.