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EXISTENTIALIST PHILOSOPHIES AND POLITICAL DECLINE

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One of the major tasks confronting the historian who is engaged in the study of ideas is an understanding of the relationship between manifest political change and the shifting currents of formal philosophic thought. It falls within the historian's province to shed light on the order of precedence existing between philosophy and polity in any particular situation. The phenomenal growth of interest in existentialist philosophies among European intellectuals in recent decades is a matter for inquiry. Existentialism has attracted such wide notice that Jean Wahl, a proponent, lamented that the philosophy had become a world problem.¹

The popularity of existentialism in Europe seems to coincide with national political decline and insecurity. The two publications which marked the beginning of the movement in the twentieth century² appeared in Germany after World War I. These early writings received wide notice, and after their appearance several German universities initiated the study of the philosophy. During the 1920's many German commentaries on existentialism were published. It was during this time that the works of Soren Kierkegaard, whose thought is regarded as the foundation of contemporary existentialism, became available to German readers.

Kierkegaard's works stimulated further interest in existentialism in Germany, and by 1930 it was evident from the widespread discussion and sizeable literature that a major trend in formal thought was in the making.

During the 1930's, however, Germany's economic and political hopes were resuscitated under the leadership of the National Socialists, and the existentialist trend was stemmed with the rise of Hitler. Existentialists such as Karl Jaspers³, who stood on the prestige of his university position to speak out against the Nazis, were deprived of their posts, and their teachings were suppressed. Others, like Martin Heidegger, accepted the new government and either refrained from publication or joined the officially sanctioned neo-Hegelian school of political thought. Thus, it seemed that German existentialism was unable to cope with the reconstruction of political might, and would die without a fight.

But the German school was not without its offspring. The writings of Jaspers, Heidegger, and Karl Barth were read outside Germany, especially in France. Under the leadership of Gabriel Marcel, a French school of existentialism was founded in 1930, and the translation of Kierkegaard's works into French was begun. During the 1930's the new thought made great headway among French intellectuals, so that the decline in Germany was paralleled by a rise in France. By 1940, when France was overrun and occupied by German troops, existentialism had acquired the status of a major philosophic school. Through the years of occupation, existentialist writings continued to appear in France, often in the form of plays or novels, and existentialist leaders risked imprisonment and death as leaders of the French resistance movement.

By the end of World War II existentialism had become as much a fad as a philosophy in France, and Jean-Paul Sartre, who had emerged during the war as the school's most colorful representative, was something of a national hero. In the period of political malaise which has gripped France since 1945, existentialism has persisted. Marcel and Sartre have been joined by scores of writers, and the sale of existentialist literature continues to be brisk.

The disastrous defeat and subsequent partitioning of Germany opened the door to a revival of the philosophy there. With the fall of the Nazi government, Jaspers resumed his university post and his writing, and he was received avidly

¹ *A Short History of Existentialism*, Philosophical Library, 1949, 1.

² These were Karl Barth's *Commentary upon the Epistle to the Romans*, and Jaspers' *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*.

³ Jaspers was professor of philosophy at Heidelberg University from 1921 to 1937 when he was dismissed for political reasons. He was reinstated in 1945.

throughout western Germany. Jaspers' works, along with those of other existentialists, have been termed in Russian-controlled zones as manifestations of western decadence. With the revival of existentialism in the universities, the philosophy has won attention elsewhere in Germany, where it holds a dominant place in German thought.

The movement has attracted notice elsewhere in Europe, and since 1945 Kierkegaard's books and those of his followers have been translated into all the major languages of western Europe. To what extent existentialism may influence the thought of intellectuals in England, or Italy, or Spain, is difficult to determine, for the philosophy is relatively new in each of these nations. It may be noted, however, that each of these countries has produced thinkers who are influenced by the assertion of the school.

The question which emerges in the light of the apparent widespread interest in existentialism is this: What is the appeal of this philosophy to the European of the mid-twentieth century? There are several possible answers. Norberto Bobbio, an Italian thinker, ascribes its growth to the toxic decadentism which today permeates European culture.⁴ Or the movement might be regarded as the manifestation of temporary unrest following war. Whatever the explanation, it must emerge in relationship to a *Weltanschauung* created in an atmosphere of power recession and decline.

The institutions which supported the past greatness of Europe, today seem incapable of holding back the difficulties which plague Europe's society or of guaranteeing any future security. The shattered hopes and the physical ruin following World War II drove Europeans to a stage of despair and anguish, on which existentialism dwells.

The philosophy of existentialism is a melancholy one, having won for Kierkegaard the sobriquet the Melancholy Dane. Existentialists agree on one point at least--that man must undergo a personal crisis of forlornness, isolation, and despair before he can comprehend life. The reward of the philosophy is the gift of alertness, awareness, participation. Existentialism is harshly critical of thought systems which tend to sacrifice free man to institutions or systems. In the words of Emmanuel Mounier, existentialism is primarily a reaction to all philosophies which deal excessively with things and ideas, to the exclusion of man.⁵ It fears that formal thought too often reduces man to the merest part of a vast cosmic mechanism, by making him a machine which operates without choice or effect.

This objectification of man--that is, his reduction to mere essence, a classifiable object of known quantity and quality and predictable responses--is the fundamental error of philosophers, according to existentialists. Catalog all the observations of man that you wish, but when you have done this you have not understood him. There is something about man which is above classification, and this is the existence of man. What is existence? Here is the question to which essentialist philosophy has no answer, but more than this, it is the question which essentialism fails to ask.

The fact that I am, says the existentialist, is for me the central fact of the universe. But this is not the same as *cogito, ergo sum*, for my being is more than thought. Being is anxiety. I am anxious that I exist, and that I do so in a certain time and place, and may not do so always. Problems of philosophy are outside of me, but they must be studied in relationship to me, for their very existence as problems depends upon me and my existence.

The problem of defining the term existence occupies a major place in existentialist literature. But it leaves the reader with little satisfaction, because existence is found within personal involvement and experience, rather than through observation and identification. Defining existence poses a problem akin to that which would be encountered if we were to attempt definition of some such word as pain or love to a person who had never encountered these sensations. Existence must be felt, not reasoned, and can be felt only under certain conditions. It never can be known, if knowledge implies objectification. There is

⁴ *The Philosophy of Decadentism, A Study of Existentialism*, Macmillan, 1948, 60.

⁵ *Existentialist Philosophies*, Macmillan, 1949, 20.

no degree of existence, no gradual understanding of existence, no transition period of becoming an existent.

The existent person undergoes a profound emotional experience involving frustration, anguish, forlornness, despair, and rejection. During this crisis he feels that there is no hope, that knowledge is in vain, that science and its results are meaningless, that progress is ephemeral and apparent. Where, then, should he turn? To God? To love? To society? To himself? He discovers here that he is possessed with a dreadful freedom, the freedom of complete decision, and in this discovery he finds the meaning of existence, the meaning of mankind. At this point, in existentialist language, he looks over the brim of knowledge into the Nothingness, or into the Face of God, or into existence, and he finds an infinite relationship between himself and his destiny. He realizes the Infinite. He transcends.

This emotional experience, or crisis situation, is the fundamental assertion of the school. Divergence among the existentialists begins with its assessment. All agree that it is the instrument which lifts the existent being from the category of Everyman. Kierkegaard saw it as containing the conversion experience of the Christian. Sartre says it represents the revelation that there is nothing beyond--no God, no other. Heidegger saw in it an answer to the problem of ontology.

The interpreters of the crisis situation may be separated into two main groups. The first, of which Barth and Marcel may be considered representative, agree with Kierkegaard, and have led in a movement toward neo-orthodox Christianity. Barth, who has influenced profoundly Reinhold Niebuhr, is credited by Helmut Kuhn with having resuscitated Protestant theology in our time.⁶ The crisis situation, according to Barth, leads to the enthronement of faith as the source of ultimate truth, and the discovery of a God who resembles the God experienced by the prophets of the Old Testament. Barth's version calls for an ultimate rejection of formal philosophy and a return to religion. In a similar vein, Marcel arrives at a Christian humanism. The crisis results in communion with another, and the nature of Being is discovered through the communion, which is called the I-Thou relationship.

The second branch, non-Christian existentialism, includes philosophers whose interpretations range from the amoral, analytic beliefs of Jaspers through the ontological concerns of Heidegger to the moral atheism of Sartre. For this school the crisis situation teaches man that he simply is flung into the web of existence for no apparent reason. Man discovers himself and is fearful of the freedom which is his. There is no predetermined purpose or goal to guide him. He is alone, and choice is completely and frightfully his. His freedom is neither a delusion nor the gift of God. It simply exists, for no reason. Man's tragedy lies in the odds against him, in the effect or lack of effect of his choices.

Sartre urges moral responsibility. Since the crisis situation shows the existent that there is no other, no God to blame for misfortune, he knows that he must shoulder the burden of his own behavior. Man must be responsible for his behavior and for the well-being of others, and he should not participate in movements which he judges to be immoral. It is better to commit suicide than to fight in an unjust war. This doctrine of individual moral responsibility, devoid of religious implication, has held a wide appeal among those whose faith in orthodox religion has waned. Sartre's existentialism is perhaps the most popular of the French interpretations today.

To the inhabitant of the European wasteland, existentialism holds a positive attraction. For what mature person in western Europe could have avoiced, during the past decade, the experiences of despair upon which the philosophy dwells? And what European did not feel resentment toward the objectification which resulted in the loss of personal freedoms? The job of existentialism, as Mounier says,⁷ is to rescue man from the inertia of things, from docile socialness, and to restore to him a sense of wonder, curiosity, responsibility. This philosophy strives to bring man back to the center of the philosophic universe. to give him choice, to call him individual. It is a personal philosophy which

⁶ "Existentialism," in Vergilius Ferm, ed., *A History of Philosophical Systems*, Philosophical Library, 1950.

⁷ *Op. cit.*, 69.

appears to be tailor-made for individuals living in a civilization which has been ravaged by war.

Europeans have witnessed the technological results of scientific rationalism coupled with the political results of Hegelian idealism. The combination has nearly destroyed European society. A madness which has stemmed from an absence of inwardness has all but engulfed a generation which sought to regard the world as Pure Manifestation. But the thinkers of Europe have seen the danger and have looked for a way out. They have sought a philosophy which is humanistic, and which asserts the value of inwardness. For many, existentialism is the way.