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Existentialism and Human Freedom

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## Existentialism and Human Freedom

John Killinger

"It is of our times and it is to our times . . . we cannot fail to be impressed by its passionate relevance," says Professor Killinger of existentialism, as he reviews its major tenets from Sören Kierkegaard to Albert Camus. Dr. Killinger, a professor of English at Georgetown College, Georgetown, Kentucky, is the author of Hemingway and the Dead Gods, published recently by the University of Kentucky Press.

WHICH is freer, a prisoner awaiting execution or a waiter serving tables in a restaurant? Nine persons out of ten would say, "Why, the waiter, of course!" The tenth person, however, particularly if he were an existentialist, might reply that the answer depends on several things, but that the prisoner is quite possibly the freer of the two. The reason is that existentialism speaks of a kind of personal freedom that is inviolable regardless of circumstances and that can exist in prison as fully as it can anywhere else in the world.

Several existentialist writers have specifically dealt with the subject of the prisoner's freedom. Jean-Paul Sartre has treated it, for instance, in "The Wall,"<sup>1</sup> a short story about the manner in which several conspirators face their imminent execution. Human emotions are laid bare and bleeding as

each man is confronted by the traumatic possibility of his own ceasing to be. Most of the prisoners behave very badly in this situation, like animals that have become aware of their impending slaughter. But one man, Pablo Ibbieta, is master of himself in this truest of all crucibles. He refuses to break, to become an animal trembling before the block. He faces the affair of "the wall" with dignity and courage. In the last hours, the soldiers offer to release him if he will tell them where they can find Ramon Gris, the rebel leader. Ibbieta knows where Gris is, and he no longer has any concern for him—not since facing that wall has sheared away such cares. Still he refuses to inform, not even in return for his release, because the will to resist remains the triumphant act of his personal freedom. They can imprison him, torture him, at last riddle his body with bullets; but his will, his individual freedom, is an inner citadel they cannot break. He alone holds the key to that.

<sup>1</sup>This story, together with many selections from the primary works of the existentialists, is now available to the English reader in paperback: Walter Kaufmann (ed.), *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (New York: Meridian, 1956).

Sartre has likewise written about the waiter who is not free.<sup>2</sup> The waiter, unlike Ibbieta, is not in a prison—at least, not in a visible one. But secretly, invisibly, in his inner being, the waiter has never been free. He has long since surrendered his freedom, his personal integrity, to the image of being a waiter. He enters the room a little too much like a waiter. He carries his tray with an expertness that betrays the fact that he is a waiter, that more than anything else in the world he is a waiter. He is a waiter before he is a man. His individualism has been lost to the profession of catering. He has conformed to the image of what other people conceive of a waiter as being. He is not the master of his soul as Pablo Ibbieta was; his *self* has been ground down.

The freedom of man, according to the approach of Sartre, depends not on situation but on attitude. Sartre and the existentialists are vitally interested in the whole problem of what it means to be free. This distinction between slavery that looks like freedom and freedom that looks like slavery is, in fact, one expression of the central thrust of the entire movement of existentialism in our time.

“Existentialism,” writes one Parisian existentialist, “constitutes an effort to rehabilitate man in his own eyes, to restore him to himself.”<sup>3</sup> “Man is freedom,”<sup>4</sup> says Sartre. Syllogistically, then, we may say that existentialism tries to return man to himself as free-

dom, as possibility and openness to the future, as indeterminate potentiality. Man’s nature is not “fixed” as a stone’s or a tree’s is; he is a creature with the ability to choose, and decides what he shall become. Another way of putting it is the existentialists’ favorite maxim that, for man, “existence precedes essence.” Because man can choose, within the limits of his finitude, how he shall live, his existence occurs before his essence is determined. That is, you must exist as a person before it can be said of you that you are such and such a type of person. As it was recently put in a clever little ditty called “The Existentialists,”

Ego  
Ergo  
Sic.<sup>5</sup>

“I am, therefore I am thus.” The establishment of my existence is prior to the determination of my essence.

This accounts for the preponderance of ontological discussion in the writings of the existentialists. Invariably, they speak of two kinds of being, the being of objects and the being of subjects. Because he is capable of existing as a subject, a self-determining agent, man is authentic only if he exercises this potentiality. If he prefers the relative easiness and security of existing as an object (as the waiter did who disavowed his true self for that of a waiter), he is inauthentic. The highest praise an existentialist can pay to any man is to say that he is behaving authentically—that he has chosen man-ness over thingness, subjectivity over objectivity.

<sup>2</sup>In *Being and Nothingness*, tr. Hazel Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), p. 30.

<sup>3</sup>Francis Jeanson, in Colette Audry (ed.), *Pour et contre l'existentialisme* (Paris: Atlas, 1948), p. 27.

<sup>4</sup>*Existentialism*, tr. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1947), p. 27.

<sup>5</sup>Egbert S. Oliver, in *College English*, XXII (January 1961), p. 252.

Most people, of course, prefer the easier way of the inauthentic life. They do not want this kind of "dreadful freedom"<sup>6</sup> because of the magnitude of responsibility it carries with it. It is freedom with suffering, contrary to their idea of what freedom ought to be. So they choose slavery without suffering. They would rather live as objects, devoid of true humanness, than face the consequences of self-determinism. And, as one writer has said, "Freedom dies at that point where man tries to bring his life into conformity with the visible instead of the invisible."<sup>7</sup>

There has probably never been a time in history when there have been more depersonalizing forces at work on man—forces that would fix his essence or take away his freedom by lulling him into indifference about the whole matter. There have always been forms of collectivism, but never before coupled with technological science. Even if we never become the "brave new world," we have at least come close enough to it to produce a number of novels about it. The idea of a society without individuals is now regarded as a threatening possibility and not as a mere projection of the imagination.

Probably it is the awful imminence of such a possibility that has produced the numerous men who make up the vanguard of existentialism. As Søren Kierkegaard wrote in his *Journals* in 1845, "There is a bird called the stormy-petrel, and that is what I am;

when in a generation storms begin to gather, individuals of my type appear." And individuals there are. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche and Dostoevsky were the forerunners. But in our century the tributaries have swollen together into a remarkable stream, with names like Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, Martin Buber, Nicholas Berdyaev, Rudolph Bultmann, Gabriel Marcel, Jacques Maritain, Paul Tillich, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus leading the existentialist roster. Some are philosophers, some theologians, some mere popularizers; some are theists and some atheists; some call themselves existentialists and some abjure the name; but all can be traced to the thought and vocabulary of Kierkegaard, and all are dedicated like him to the reawakening of the individual consciousness and the innate freedom of man. They believe, with him, that "the greatest good which which can be done to any being, greater than any end to which it can be created, is to make it free."<sup>8</sup>

### Søren Kierkegaard

Kierkegaard, who died in 1855, probably did not, like Tennyson, dream of the advances that science and technology would make in the next hundred years. Yet he is strikingly contemporary. He was a Freudian before Freud, and his writings are full of what we know as depth-psychology.<sup>9</sup> He chronicled a century before William H. Whyte and Martin E. Marty the phenomena of "the organi-

<sup>6</sup>This is the fitting title of Marjorie Grene's study of existentialism, published by the University of Chicago Press, 1948.

<sup>7</sup>David E. Roberts, *Existentialism and Religious Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 106.

<sup>8</sup>*The Journals of Kierkegaard*, ed. Alexander Dru (New York: Harper, 1958), p. 112.

<sup>9</sup>A Harvard University psychiatrist tells me this term is no longer in vogue, but I hope he is wrong—at least, until some more descriptive one is invented.

zation man" and the Christian with "religion-in-general." And he determined to do something about them.

His resolution began to form when he was a student in Berlin and became bored with academic philosophy. "Schelling," he wrote to his brother Peter, "drivels on quite intolerably." The age of Hegel in Germany was the crowning glory of the rational enterprise started by Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* in the seventeenth century. Ever since Descartes, man had been regarded primarily as a *thinking* animal (has the backwater only now reached us in the "thinking man" advertisements?). Hegel's elaborate thesis-anti-thesis-synthesis philosophy was the ultimate in abstraction. He even drew theology into the province of the philosopher, where it remained until the Neo-Reformation in this century said no to the philosophers just as Luther had said no to Erasmus four hundred years earlier.

Kierkegaard turned on Hegel with a fine passion. Man is not primarily a thinker! he cried. He is a volitional actor, a being who makes choices and lives by them.<sup>10</sup> What has he to do with abstract and synthetic systems of thought? He eats fish and chips, and earns his living in the stinking, clattering market place. What he needs is not a philosophy but a religion! Kierkegaard spent much time in the streets, talking affably to anyone he met there. These people were not concerned with categorical hypotheses; they were living their lives! Nor could the philosophers themselves live in their great systems of thought. "In relation to their systems," Kierkegaard

wrote, "most systematizers are like a man who builds an enormous castle and lives in a shack close by; they do not live in their own enormous systematic buildings."<sup>11</sup> The whole approach of modern philosophy was wrong. Its development from the Cartesian premise was misleading from the very beginning. "It is a positive starting point for philosophy when Aristotle says that philosophy begins with wonder, not as in our day with doubt."<sup>12</sup>

But if Kierkegaard was disturbed by academic philosophy, he was more disturbed by the complacency of the common people themselves. Particularly was this so in regard to religion. It is too easy to be a Christian in Christendom today, he said. The minister mounts his pulpit and talks about suffering and everyone enjoys it. They are all playing a game, and no one is playing harder than the minister himself. The more eloquently he speaks about suffering, the larger will be his salary and the finer his carriage. Most people are even too spiritless to be sinners, decided Kierkegaard. So, at last, after years of waiting to see what his mission in life would be—he compared himself to a young man standing with his belongings all packed on the front porch while he tried to pick out a bride to move off with—he had found it. It would be his mission to make things more difficult for people, thereby returning them to themselves as individuals. He would be a modern Socrates, whom he once described as "a gad-fly who provoked people by means of the individual's passion, not allowing him to admire indolently and

<sup>10</sup>So Kierkegaard called his first work *Either/Or*.

<sup>11</sup>*The Journals*, p. 98.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 68.

effeminately, but demanding his self of him."<sup>13</sup> He would awaken men to their freedom—and to the dread that always accompanies it. Christianity began as a scandal, he declared, and it cannot be Christianity without being scandal. No man can be saved without first seeing himself as a sinner alone before God. You must stop playing at religion and be serious if you would be saved. The church-state is not the Church. Talking about suffering is not the same as suffering. Mere cultural religion is not enough; a man must be "contemporaneous with Christ." From first to last, faith is a risk, a commitment to the unlikely, an irrational leap of the whole man, and it is not something you can do with others.

Kierkegaard overstated his case, to be sure. His extreme emphasis on individualism in religion neglects the mighty traditions of the Church and slights the noble history of communal worship. But he had to exaggerate in order to be a corrective. He had to lie in order to tell the truth. There is no doubt that he knew what he was doing. But he did it to save the individual from anonymity and soullessness in the Christian aggregate, to return man to himself. "My whole life," he wrote in the *Journals*, "is an epigram calculated to make people aware."

### Heidegger and Jaspers

Inasmuch as Kierkegaard avoided developing a philosophical system, it may seem strange that Martin Heidegger, one of the most important existentialists in our century and the teacher who has probably done most to revive the name of Kierkegaard in

our time, did develop a system. But Heidegger's system<sup>14</sup> is based largely on ontology, and draws heavily on the spirit and writings of Kierkegaard. Heidegger speaks of two kinds of being: simple objective being (*Sein*), such as is proper to all things; and being-there (*Dasein*), of which only man is capable. But man is not automatically being-there. If he lives and dies only as one of the crowd, never aware of his special possibilities as a free agent and therefore never positing himself as an individual, he misses the chief glory of human existence. He never becomes authentic. The trouble is that man is "thrown"<sup>15</sup> into existence before he knows what it means to exist; he is on the stage with no rehearsal behind him and no script in front of him. Somehow he must learn what it is to exist, to have a being-there, an individuality, in a world of common being. Heidegger says that the only thing that will reveal this to man is to confront him with the possibility of his *ceasing* to exist. Being-there, unlike simple being, is capable of annihilation. Therefore let a man face his own death; in the resultant trauma it will be revealed to him what a special thing it is to be a man. And, if he will but keep before him this threat of not being, he will live from day to day in such a circumspect awareness that he will be truly existing. Unfortunately, however, most

<sup>14</sup>First propounded in *Sein und Zeit, Erste Hälfte* (1927), the linguistic idiosyncrasies of which still prevent its translation from the German.

<sup>15</sup>Several existentialists use the words "thrown," "hurled," "plunged," etc., to describe man's entrance into the world. In its sense of the austere relationship between human life and the universe, existentialism bears a strong similarity to Sophoclean drama.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 98.

men would rather face anything than this dreadful freedom, and so they forget the possibility of their annihilation by steeping themselves in trivial, ordinary cares.

Another German existentialist, Karl Jaspers, has written prolifically on the subject of man's losing himself in various workaday cares. Jaspers is particularly concerned with our subservience to our own technological developments. As we become more and more dependent upon modern scientific inventions (do not luxuries always tend to become necessities?), we become more and more dependent upon the civilization that produces them. To keep that civilization functioning efficiently, we assume the duties of tiny cogs on the ever-turning wheels. We become mass-men caught in the inexorable geometry of a Newtonian world. "The worker at the machine," says Jaspers, "concentrating upon immediate aims, has no time or inclination left for the contemplation of life as a whole."<sup>16</sup> Pragmatic concern replaces "ultimate concern."<sup>17</sup> The result is disastrous to real human existence.

When the average functional capacity has become the standard of achievement, the individual is regarded with indifference. No one is indispensable. He is not himself, having no more genuine individuality than one pin in a row, a mere object of general utility. Those most effectively predestined to such a life are persons without any serious desire to be themselves. Such have the preference. It seems as if the world must be given over to medi-

ocrities, to persons without a destiny, without a rank or a difference, without genuinely human attributes.<sup>18</sup>

Even those who guide this great mechanized society are essentially the "slaves of their functions," which merely demand more intelligence, talent, and activity than those of ordinary workers.

Like Heidegger, Jaspers sees as the only answer to this wholesale depersonalization confrontation of man with his own non-being, an "encounter with nothingness."<sup>19</sup>

If man is not to be allowed to founder in the mere persistence of life, it may seem essential that in his consciousness he shall be confronted with Nothingness; he must recall his origin. Whereas at the outset of his historical course he was in danger of being physically annihilated by the natural forces, now his very being is menaced by a world he has himself established. Though upon another level than in the unknown beginnings of his development, his whole being is again at stake.<sup>20</sup>

For Jaspers, man becomes aware of his existence in certain "boundary situations," notably suffering, guilt, conflict, and death. These are situations which return man upon himself for a consideration of his finitude and personal integrity. They constitute moments of choice, when a man decides to become an existing individual or to go back to the anonymity of the masses. Again it is a choice between dreadful freedom and freedom from dread.

<sup>16</sup>*Man in the Modern Age*, tr. Eden and Cedar Paul (New York: Doubleday, 1957), p. 51.

<sup>17</sup>The phrase is Paul Tillich's. Cf. esp. his *Systematic Theology*, vol. I.

<sup>18</sup>Jaspers, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

<sup>19</sup>The title of Helmut Kuhn's study of existentialism, published by Henry Regnery Co., 1949.

<sup>20</sup>Jaspers, *op. cit.*, pp. 93-94.



### Jean-Paul Sartre

The writer-lecturer-conversationalist who has done the most to bring existentialism from the classroom, where so many movements die in still-birth, to the attention of the European and American reading public is the author who posed our introductory situations of the prisoner and the waiter, Jean-Paul Sartre. Like Heidegger, under whom he studied, Sartre wrestles with a philosophy of being; the subtitle of his major work, *Being and Nothingness*, is *An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*. He too writes of two kinds of being, being-in-itself, which is common to all mere things, and being-for-itself, the being that a man may have when he claims his responsible freedom. The sudden awareness of the dialectic between being-in-itself and being-for-itself may be accompanied by the psychosomatic phenomenon of nausea. Sartre's first novel, in fact, was entitled *La Nausée*, and it included that much overworked but still illustrative passage in which Roquentin gazes at the root of a chestnut tree and realizes for the first time that he has a being that differs qualitatively from that of the root.

Just as Kierkegaard proposed suffering, Heidegger the facing of death, and Jaspers boundary situations as antidotes for the absorption of the self into ordinary, less-than-human being, Sartre too proposes to cure man of his ontological sickness by confronting him with nothingness. In *Being and Nothingness*, he brings a man to the edge of a precipice and makes him stare down into the possibility of his death at the bottom. In more splendid prose, he does a similar thing with Mathieu Delarue in the novel *The Reprieve*. Mathieu stands on the Pont

Neuf, facing the possibility of death by plunging into the Seine:

All hawsers cut, nothing now could hold him back; here was his freedom, and how horrible it was! Deep down within him he felt his heart throbbing wildly; one gesture, the mere unclasping of his hands, and *I would have been Mathieu*. Dizziness rose softly over the river; sky and bridge dissolved: nothing remained but himself and the water; it heaved up to him and rippled round his dangling legs. The water, where his future lay. At the moment *it is true*, I'm going to kill myself. Suddenly he *decided* not to do it. He decided: it shall merely be a trial. Then he was again upon his feet and walking on, gliding over the crest of a dead star. Next time, perhaps.<sup>21</sup>

Here is a literary mythologizing of Heidegger's sparer concept of the being-towards-death. It accentuates particularly well the emphasis placed upon decision: man must choose the degree of authenticity by which he shall live. And the last sentence reminds us of one essential point: the confrontation of nothingness must be repeated again and again in order to keep subjective being alive in a man. Freedom does not come cheaply.

### Albert Camus

Albert Camus, the existentialist who won the Nobel prize for literature in 1957, calls the dialectic between the being of man and the objective world around him the "absurd."<sup>22</sup> The absurdity of man's situation is apparent to anyone who tries to exist as a subject in the world of objects. Like

<sup>21</sup>*The Reprieve*, tr. Eric Sutton (New York: Knopf, 1947), pp. 364-65.

<sup>22</sup>Kierkegaard had first used the term extensively in *Fear and Trembling*.

Meursault in Camus' novel *The Stranger*, he finds the world anti-pathetic and even hostile to the one who dares to affirm his selfhood. He becomes aware of the insane character of daily living; and in the instant that he is divested of his illusions he realizes that he is an alien in the world. Authentic existence, for Camus, is for man both to accept and to rebel against this absurdity. He accepts it inasmuch as he is willing to maintain his awareness of it and not retreat into a disregard for the facts; but he rebels against it by loving existence and clinging to life in spite of it.

It is at this point that Camus repudiates Kierkegaard as an escapist because Kierkegaard, after recognizing the absurd, takes the "leap of faith" that effectively makes meaning out of the absurd. "The important thing, as Abbé Galiani said to Mme. d'Epinaï, is not to be cured, but to live with one's ailments. Kierkegaard wants to be cured. To be cured is his frenzied wish and it runs throughout his whole journal."<sup>23</sup> For Kierkegaard, sin is what alienates us from God, and absurdity is holding both our finite natures and God in polarity; for Camus, the absurd is "sin without God."<sup>24</sup> Kierkegaard's leap, says Camus, does not represent the extreme danger he likes to think it does; the danger really lies in the split-second before the leap, in being able to remain on the dizzying crest. The theme of permanent revolution must be instilled into individual experience:

Living is keeping the absurd alive. Keeping it alive is above all contemplating it. Unlike Eurydice, the absurd

dies only when we turn away from it. One of the only coherent philosophical positions is thus revolt. It is a constant confrontation between man and his own obscurity. It is an insistence upon an impossible transparency. It challenges the world anew every second.<sup>25</sup>

While we can admire the tenacity with which Camus holds to the principle of revolt, we can hardly agree that he is being fair to Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard's "leap of faith," the passage from the rational to the supra-rational, does not involve a denial of the absurd; on the contrary, there is for him no salvation unless the tension is maintained.<sup>26</sup>

While we are on the subject, though, a word is in order about non-theistic existentialism in general. The godless existentialism of Heidegger, Sartre, and Camus is the result of carrying Kierkegaard's Christian existentialism to its *logical* extremity. Once man has begun a campaign for human freedom and integrity, it is rationally plausible to go all the way and assert his freedom even from a divine being. The only trouble is that man may then be left like a ship set adrift from its moorings with no place to go. It is easy enough to call this freedom, but hasn't it really become a parody of freedom? Isn't this final cutting of hawsers in reality an abandonment of responsibility rather than an assumption of it? Isn't it true, as Augustine put it so memorably, that freedom is freedom to find ourselves in God, or, as Paul Tillich puts it in our own time,

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>26</sup>Cf. *Fear and Trembling*, tr. Robert Payne (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), p. 34: "Abraham is not Abraham without this dread."

<sup>23</sup>*The Myth of Sisyphus*, tr. Justin O'Brien (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1955), p. 36.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 38.

that we have our being in Him who is the Ground of all being?

Heidegger took Nietzsche seriously when he said that "God is dead." In a sense, Nietzsche was right. The cultural religion of his time (and Kierkegaard's), together with the whole stale system of ethics it underwrote, was worthless. It was time for a new idea of God, for a "transvaluation of all values." As Whitehead has said, "The progress of religion is defined by the denunciation of Gods."<sup>27</sup> And existentialism, from Kierkegaard and Nietzsche on, has been invaluable in producing a galvanization of Christian thought for our time. It has essentially returned the Church to reality. But herein is its value, as an anodyne, a corrective. Kierkegaard exaggerated because he thought of himself as a "pinch of spice" that would be lost in flavoring the whole. This is worthwhile. We can appreciate this. But what a perversion it is when one makes his meal on the spice and lets the substance go, which is just what nontheistic existentialism proposes to do! How much better to stand within the main stream of tradition and revelation and to use one's influence there than to abjure the past and repudiate the eternal in order to glorify the finite creature of revolt.

There is some reason to suppose, as Philip Thody suggests in his study of Camus,<sup>28</sup> that Camus himself, had he lived longer, might have become a convert to Roman Catholicism. His last, and in some respects his greatest, book was a novelette entitled *The Fall*.

<sup>27</sup>Quoted in Mark Schorer, *William Blake: The Politics of Vision* (New York: Vintage, 1959), p. 23.

<sup>28</sup>*Albert Camus: A Study of His Work* (New York: Macmillan, 1957).

Here is an obvious analogue on the Christian doctrine of the Fall of Man. Moreover, the main character, the only one who speaks in the entire book, is named Jean-Baptiste Clamence. Thody thinks the surname may be a corruption of *clemence*, or "mercy." More likely, it is related to *clamare*, "to cry out," as John the Baptist was one who cried out a message of repentance. Clamence is himself a preacher of repentance, albeit in a new mode. He has been a judge with a wide reputation for philanthropy. There was a time when he even welcomed the sight of a beggar approaching as an opportunity for displaying his charitableness. But then one day a hideous laugh from somewhere in his subconscious began to crack this mask he was wearing. He began to see that he had been only "playing a role," that when he was most present he was also most absent. At last, seized with a passion for honesty, he becomes a judge-penitent, confessing his sordid inner life to whomever he can stop long enough to listen, and causing the listener to see mirrored in the confession his own countenance. Perhaps here is the signal intent of the book, to fix its readers and whisper into their ears, as Clamence does into the ear of one of his listeners, "Mon cher compatriote."<sup>29</sup> And perhaps it suggests, too, the meaning of the book's title: the real "fall" of man, in our age, is man's failure to see himself for what he is, a creature who is capable of real existence but lives only as a mockery of reality. One is inclined to ask if Clamence's new life is really worth living at all. He himself would

<sup>29</sup>*The Fall*, tr. Justin O'Brien (New York: Knopf, 1958), p. 65.

say no, that is why he lives it. He would like to commit suicide, to "disappear definitively." But there is still the principle of revolt. As Camus wrote earlier, in *The Rebel*, "What is a rebel? A man who says no: but whose refusal does not imply a renunciation."<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps Camus' *The Fall* is a new confessional for us to set by our prayer books. At least, it reminds us in an age of collectivism that we bear guilt individually, and that much of that guilt comes in our day from a failure of nerve, a refusal to be ourselves in our daily commerce with the larger patterns of the world in which we live. Existentialism, or at least one line of it, has gone secular since the time of Kierkegaard; but it still aims for the same goal, which is to return man to himself as a center of freedom.

Clarence's acceptance of responsibility for bringing other men to self-realization reminds us, too, that, while existentialism is a movement to reclaim individualism in our time, it is not a philosophy of isolationism. Kierkegaard acknowledged that "the whole race has part in the individual, and the individual has part in the whole race."<sup>31</sup> Jaspers, who is a trained psychologist, emphasizes the necessity of interpersonal relationships. Sartre declares that a man cannot find his own freedom fully until he engages in the struggle for the freedom of all. And perhaps the finest statement of any man's need for other men is to be found in Martin Buber's poetic *I and Thou*, which says that we cannot even

have relationship with God until we have joined lines of force with our fellow men. But the fact remains, too, that there can be no real and vital community among men who have no individual freedom. Fellowship belongs only to the kind of being that is peculiarly human, and that is existential being.

### Existentialism and Our Time

One of the hallmarks of existentialism is its strict contemporaneity. Its view of life grows out of, reflects, and accuses the mood of the times. *The Fall*, for example, is a *Divine Comedy* for our age: it is brief, fragmentary, internalized; and it is telescopic—hell, purgatory, and paradise are all one, and their setting is the gray, fog-bound flatness of Amsterdam, the international city of trading and banking. Somehow it is this inevitable contemporaneity that makes the message of existentialism so urgent. It is of our times and it is to our times, and it is set so thoroughly within the context of where we live that we cannot fail to be impressed by its passionate relevance. And there is a remarkable rightness, or givenness, about most of its observations, so that the minute we begin to understand what it is all about we remark with that young lady who had just been introduced to it in a college lecture, "Why, I believe that, don't you?"

In the strictest sense, in the academic sense, existentialism is not a philosophy, but a corrective; and, as a corrective, it speaks to all philosophies. It sits in judgment upon any system that loses man from its center and loses sight of the peculiar freedom of man as its goal. It is like the Parsee on Captain Ahab's ship: it does not want

<sup>30</sup>*The Rebel*, tr. Anthony Bower (New York: Knopf, 1954), p. 19.

<sup>31</sup>*The Concept of Dread*, tr. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946), p. 26.

to run the ship, but it will judge the captain in his enterprise. Kierkegaard, for instance, abjured disciples and refused to be considered as the founder of a school of philosophy. What if a group of followers were to conform themselves to his principles? That would be to perpetuate in another form the very illness he was trying to cure—the lack of individualism in the world. He said in his *Journals* that he wished when he died to have carved upon his gravestone, “The Individual.” He likened what he was doing to the task of the soldier at Thermopylae who commanded a pass where each of the enemy had to face him singly: he would confront every man as an individual in precisely those places where a crowd could not follow—in his suffering and sin and guilt. And this is exactly what all of the existentialists in our own century have tried to do—to make man aware of himself and his freedom by setting him in boundary situations where, faced with his finitude and his own non-existence, he must choose his self or his annihilation.

Perhaps, then, Professor John Wild of Harvard is correct when he says that this is the *real* philosophy today. Academic philosophy, absorbed with categories, essences, and abstract ethical systems, is practically bankrupt, says Wild. But existentialism harks back to the best in classical philosophy,

which “conceived of value and dis-value not as properties or essences, but rather as modes of existence. Evil is to act and to exist in a warped and privative way; good is to act in accordance with nature—to exist authentically in the highest degree.”<sup>32</sup>

“To exist authentically in the highest degree”—that is the aim that existentialism sets before every man. And it is tantamount to real human freedom. Perhaps existentialism is peculiarly the philosophy for our time, when whole areas of the world are being confronted by the possibility, if not the fact, of political enslavement, and when human freedom and dignity in all areas are being seriously threatened by the forces of depersonalization, spoken and unspoken. Perhaps we need urgently to be reminded that there is a kind of freedom, albeit a freedom with dread, that cannot, on one hand, be abrogated even by a prison camp, but that can, on the other hand, be lost by attrition in suburban living patterns, complacent religion, or the tedium of a nine-to-five job. “If existence really does precede essence,” writes Sartre, “there is no explaining things away by reference to a fixed and given human nature. In other words, there is no determinism, man is free, man is freedom.”<sup>33</sup>

<sup>32</sup>*The Challenge of Existentialism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955), p. 23.

<sup>33</sup>*Existentialism*, p. 27.

#### DROUGHT

Searing, scorching, the white hot sun  
 beats down upon a suffering land—  
 the pulsing of the earth has stopped.  
 And in the luminous quivering heat  
 a solitary gull wheels and glides, searches and cries—  
 for just one sign of rain.

Cando, North Dakota

—LINDA DREYER