

EXISTENTIALISM

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In a field where there should be precision in terminology "existentialism" stands out as being unusually vague. Confusion arises from the use of the term in two different ways. Existentialism refers both to a philosophic movement, including a great number of the well known philosophers since Hegel, and to a particular philosophy developed by Jean Paul Sartre and his contemporaries as a particular part of the whole movement. Indeed, the term has been stretched to the point where some proponents of existentialism have linked everyone in the modern period to the trend, including even the pragmatists. They believe that the pragmatists—who have already had, and should continue to have, far greater effect than the existentialists—are merely existentialists unable to express themselves clearly.

This philosophic movement can be divided into two parts. The first part took the form of a reaction against the rationalist philosophers, and especially against Hegel; while the second part involved the building of a positive philosophy around the principles of existence brought forward by the originators of the movement.

This paper will attempt to sketch this philosophic movement by looking briefly at two of the philosophers involved in it, Soren Kierkegaard and Jean Paul Sartre.

The search of many of the philosophers up to the time of Kierkegaard had been for the essence of man. They looked for the model which would explain every human being. Others directed their work toward finding a goal for mankind. At the end of the age of the rationalists, Hegel developed a theory which placed human reason in such unusually high esteem that a reaction against his philosophy was almost inevitable. As it turned out, the reaction was extremely widespread and still continues. According to Hegel, truth is to be found in the whole. To know the truth about anything is to see it as a whole. Everything is in order. And it is only because we are too close to life that we cannot see the truth in it, that is, see it as a whole. The truth in art, society or history is each one taken as a whole; and all the wholes taken together make up the absolute truth of the universe, which is seen only by

God. Man himself is a part of this absolute whole. Many felt that this was pantheistic, whether Hegel would admit it or not.

The first to attack Hegel's philosophy was Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), a Danish theologian and philosopher. Kierkegaard was a Christian and believed in a perception of God. He said that to make man a part of the whole is to negate him as an individual. Man cannot be made to fit into a system because systems do not allow for freedom of choice, the one essential Kierkegaard was willing to attribute to man. Man is an intensity of feelings in relation with beings—especially the Divine Being. He said that the Christian is concerned only with his own personal path to faith. For him the impersonal is trivial. Truth for the Christian is in subjectivity, in the continual development of a relationship between his personal intensity of feelings and the Divine Being. Kierkegaard believed that each man, by means of his freedom of choice, develops something which is entirely foreign to any system, and which thus cannot even be communicated to another being. It is this completely personal quality of man which enables him to be an existent outside of God—who was the System for Kierkegaard—and to take part in a relationship with God.

Kierkegaard went so far in developing a system of existence as to say that man goes through three stages in becoming a Christian. These are the aesthetic, moral and religious stages, in each of which he turns toward a different goal. The religious stage is reached when man, having found frustration in the aesthetic and moral stages, recognizes God and the implications of an infinite being.

Hegel had spoken of the peak in man's life coming when he catches a glimpse of the order of creation and the purpose of life. To Kierkegaard, the highest point is reached when man recognizes the complete futility and absurdity of life. It is at this point that man, in his feeling of "nothingness," can fall into a relationship with God, and complete faith is thus achieved. Feelings of "anxiety," "nausea" and "anguish" are what the finite being must feel in the face of the Infinite. These are the emotions which tell, not of the grand order of life, but of its futility and lack of meaning. Feelings of satisfaction, accomplishment and a sense of order, are suspect as the emotional manifestations of self-merit. The Christian has, in the cross, a symbol of the absurdity and futility of

mortal efforts. When man crucified Christ, he left a lasting example of his incorrigible incompetence.

Kierkegaard felt that thought had been valued too highly. Man must act, feel and believe, not only think. He rejected the idea that reason could be a panacea, because the philosophers were searching for a system which did not exist. Kierkegaard took considerable time to attack the systematizers. "I am willing to fall down adoringly before the System if only I can catch sight of it." "Most systematizers in relation to their system fare like the man who builds a huge palace and himself lives next door to it in a barn."

Kierkegaard feared the day when all right and wrong would be determined by statistics.

He was joined in this attack on the Hegelian school by many others: Heidegger and Jaspers, who followed Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche who also emphasized will and action instead of thought and scholarship. Even Marx sounded an existential tone when he said: "Let us revolt against the rule of thoughts"—do not understand reality, change it.

Kierkegaard looked ahead to a Christian world where, the search for the system abandoned, there would be no more essence philosophy, just existence philosophy. But he saw the danger in existence philosophy. No positive system could be built on these ideas of purely subjective existence. To systematize subjectivity is to negate it. He wanted people to be concrete existents, not receivers of a new theory about existence. He was careful not to build a system, giving examples from his own life as illustrations and not in any sense as prototypes. But he predicted that eventually someone would make the mistake of building a positive theory of subjective existence.

The person to make that mistake was Jean Paul Sartre. It was the end of World War II. France, never the best place to look for the order of life, had seldom been in a worse condition. Sartre, a survivor from the French underground, found Kierkegaard's rejection of all systems to his liking, and set about adapting Kierkegaard's ideas to his own. He adopted the name "existentialism" for his own school of philosophy.

Sartre was an atheist. He reasoned that there was no God. The validity of his reasoning on this point has been questioned by

other philosophers, but that was not essential. The important thing was that Sartre believed that there was no God. He was willing to start from there.

The foundation of Sartre's philosophy is the statement that "existence precedes essence." To illustrate this he considers a man making a paper-cutter. Before the man starts he has an abstract concept of a paper-cutter, its shape, what it will be used for, etc. The essence of the paper-cutter is the abstract concept from which it comes into existence. In this case essence precedes existence. But, says Sartre, if there is no God, no creator, there is no essence for man to adhere to. Man's existence precedes his essence. There is no pattern for him to follow because there is no God to set that pattern.

Sartre's objection to the philosophies of materialism is that they do not allow for man's overwhelming degree of freedom. According to Sartre man finds himself condemned to be free in a godless, and thence purposeless, world. Man's feelings of anxiety, anguish, despair and overpowering nothingness come from his search for an essence which does not exist. Because there is no God, man must develop his own essence. Once man realizes that there is no predetermined goal toward which he must strive, the anxiety of choice is eliminated. Choice is no longer a problem of thought but a problem of action. Because there is no standard on which to base a judgment, choice is made, not by thinking, but by acting. The thought process is necessary before acting, but is no cause for anxiety.

Few philosophies have been so successful on a popular level. The fad of existentialism during Sartre's height was extremely widespread. Yet a very few years after the peak of its popularity, existentialism is all but dead. There are two main reasons for this rapid fall. The first is that it was a dismal philosophy and could survive only in an extremely dismal climate. The terrifying consequences of accepting its principles could be chosen only as an alternative to the very worst circumstances. The world today is not a pretty place in which to live, but there are enough rays of hope to melt the icy forms of existential doctrines. The second factor in the decline of Sartre's creation is the question of its validity as a piece of philosophic reasoning. Many philosophers hold that Sartre contradicted himself in trying to avoid offering a

world of more chaos and despair than the one which he rejected. In accepting the existential principle that there could be no theory of existence because each man created his own essence from his subjectivity, Sartre denied himself the possibility of creating any general pattern of existence. Yet it would seem that he made just that mistake when he set down his rules for being an existentialist.

We do not try to determine why existentialism became as popular as it did. But we can point to similar trends in both music and art which occurred at the same time. All involved the rejection of form. In fact, rejection of form was set up as the criterion for judging the results. The use of form in everything and the function of variety within a form, especially the human form, are stressed for the New Church man. He cannot accept that which uses the rejection of form as a principle of action. He cannot make variety instead of form the end. Do not music, art and also philosophy abandon an important use when they focus only on the chaos which can be found in everyday life? And as to philosophy, does not its turning entirely away from the search for truth mean the end of philosophy itself?

To comment briefly on both Kierkegaard and Sartre:

Kierkegaard's philosophy is weakened by the basic contradiction that is present in the doctrine of faith alone. He places prime importance in man's rejection of the saving value of good works, but is unwilling to accept the consequences thereof.

Sartre's existentialism emphasizes the terrifying results of rejecting all objective standards in life. The existentialist is comparable to a man who, because he finds that a set target is difficult to hit, rejects the use of the target. He then shoots at random, circling whatever is hit and calling that the target. Sartre found objective criteria a cause for anxiety, so he substituted personal whims in their place. If materialism evidences love of the world, then existentialism may do the same for the love of self.