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Chapter Five

Christian Existentialism

Paul Tillich

In Chapters Three and Four it was noted that the breakup of the movement of Dialectical theology in the 1920s and early 1930s was, in part, brought about by the debate among the members of the group on the legitimacy of grounding Christian theology in an existentialist analysis of the human situation. Karl Barth opposed such an "anthropological" starting point, which, he believed, gave priority to the search for a philosophical "point of contact" between Christianity and the human situation. With the dissolution of the movement of Dialectical theology over this issue there emerged, as we have seen, several creative developments in Protestant thought. Emil Brunner represented one route and Friedrich Gogarten typified another. Karl Barth moved in a third and counter direction, whereas Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich were to follow the paths suggested earlier by Søren Kierkegaard and later by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), that is, theologies correlated with an existentialist hermeneutics. While rightly understood as a twentieth-century movement of thought, the existentialist stance in philosophy can be discerned in many periods of Western thought as a protest against the persistent claims that human existence can be comprehended adequately within some rational conceptual scheme. Existential thinkers have always contended that our finite existence is marked by a radical contingency, uncertainty, and freedom that tells against any abstract rationalism.

In this chapter we will examine the Existentialist theologies of two of the giants of modern

Protestant theology, Paul Tillich and Rudolf Bultmann. We will also explore the existential themes in the work of an important twentieth-century Catholic philosopher, Gabriel Marcel (1889–1973).

Chief among the precursors of twentieth-century Existentialism are Pascal, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard.* Pascal (1623–1662) lived at a time of rapid scientific advance, which appeared to him to leave humanity in a state of frightening contingency amidst the spatial and temporal infinities of the physical universe. He saw humans as grand yet pathetic creatures who find themselves in a world into which they have been *cast* without knowing why or to what end.

> When I consider the short duration of my life, swallowed up in the eternity before and after, the little space which I fill . . . , cast into the infinite immensity of spaces of which I am ignorant and which know me not, I am frightened, and shocked at being here rather than there; for there is no reason why here rather than there, why now rather than then. Who has put me here? By whose order and direction have this place and time been allotted me? (*Pensées*, 205)

Here Pascal strikes a chord that is heard again and again in existentialist literature. The individual finds him or herself alone, alienated from both the social world and the physical world of nature, which serve only to point up the utter contingency, loneliness, and apparent absurdity of existence.

The events of two monstrous world wars and the appearance of several totalitarian powers within a period of a few decades were important factors in the emergence of Existentialism and its dominant position in continental European philosophy between 1920 and 1950. Existentialism represents, in part, a response to the irrational events of those years. Nevertheless, the sources of the movement are many and stretch back to the beginnings of our history. There are, however, three twentieth-century philosophers who can justly be called the creators of twentieth-century Existentialist philosophy: Karl Jaspers (1883–1969), Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980). Heidegger and Jaspers were developing their philosophies independently at approximately the same time after World War I. Heidegger published his most important work, *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*), in 1927; Jaspers' *Philosophie* appeared in 1932. Sartre was a pupil of Heidegger and published his influential *L'Etre et le Néant* (*Being and Nothingness*) in 1943.

In addition to this threesome there are numerous other philosophers and writers who, although perhaps not technically existentialists, consistently expressed existentialist themes in their writings. A list of such twentieth-century figures would include Gabriel Marcel, Albert Camus (1913–1960), and Simone Weil (1909–1943) in France; the Russian writer Nikolai Berdyaev (1874–1948); the Spanish writers Miguel de Unamuno (1864–1936) and Jose Ortega y Gasset (1883–1955); and the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (1878–1965).

It is not possible, nor is it our purpose here, to attempt a full description of the principal doctrines of any of the major existentialist philosophers. Their doctrines are complex and differ technically in important respects. Nevertheless, Heidegger, Jaspers, Sartre, and Marcel share several concerns, which place them in the same philosophical family tree. What they share are a number of themes that repeatedly appear in their writings. A brief analysis of these key themes will give a general picture of the movement as a whole.

KEY EXISTENTIALIST THEMES

Existence Precedes Essence

Sartre has said that the chief doctrine of Existentialism is that existence precedes essence. This appears clear enough until one examines the words more fully. If one agrees with Kant that there is no determinate difference *in essence* between one hundred imaginary dollars and one hundred dollars in my pocket, but that there is,

* For Nietzsche and Kierkegaard see Vol. I, Ch. 15.

nevertheless, all the difference in the world in my *existential* financial situation, then there are many philosophers who are not existentialists but who accept Sartre's doctrine.

What Sartre means by this doctrine is that there are no eternal essences, say in the mind of God, that precede the existence of things. If these are essences, they are determined by human, free decision. However, there are many existentialist philosophers who, though holding that "existence precedes essence," would not agree with Sartre. What these philosophers mean by existence precedes essence is simply that existence must not be approached *a priori* but rather through immediate personal experience. One does not, for example, start with an abstract concept of human being and then try to fit experience into one's concept. One begins with the concrete experience of being-in-the-world. This is not to deny that human nature and experience have some common structures or essence; however, it means that if such essences exist they must be discovered *a posteriori* through my experiences and my participation in the experiences of others.

This means, further, that the existentialist begins his philosophizing with problems that arise from her or his own personal existence as a human being. The existential thinker is not a dispassionate observer but a passionate actor whose philosophical reflection emerges from an active engagement in the world. As Feuerbach said: "Do not wish to be a philosopher in contrast to being a man . . . do not think as a thinker . . . think as a living, real being . . . think *in* Existence."[1]

The Critique of Rational Objectivity

What the existentialists distrust about so-called objective reflection is, in the words of Kierkegaard, that it "makes the subject accidental and thereby transforms his Existence into something impersonal, and this impersonal character is precisely its objective validity. . . ."[2] But all significant knowledge must, in the existentialist's view, pose the question "What does this knowledge mean for *me*?" There is nothing wrong with "objective" knowledge as far as it goes; where it proves dangerous is in its refusal to consider experiences that purely objective modes of analysis and judgment cannot explain or warrant. A good many issues in life can and should be settled only by objective criteria. But there are many questions (and existentially the most significant) that belie logical or empirical resolution and demand the risk of personal decision.

What is more, it is not enough that one know the objective truth but that it be made existentially one's own. A person can believe Christianity is the truth and yet remain personally aloof from it. "Truth," as Kierkegaard said, "consists precisely in inwardness."[3] The only reason we can observe the activities of other creatures with detached objectivity is because we are not personally touched by their lives. Place ourselves in their situation and our frame of reference would significantly alter our understanding of the situation. How, then, can a purely objective investigation ever know the truth of human existence? Is it not the case that we can only understand another way of existence by experiencing that existence existentially? Is it not true that we can only know what it means to love, trust, and die by actually loving and trusting and dying? "One becomes a theologian," remarked Luther, "by living, by dying, and by being damned—not by understanding, reading, and speculating."[4]

Furthermore, what is wrong with a narrowly objective approach to life is that it denies freedom of choice and self-determination. From the scientific point of view everything can be explained deterministically within the cause-effect nexus. But when a person no longer considers her or himself to be self-determining in some important respects, that person comes to view her or himself as a mere product of the environment and loses any sense of individuality; the person becomes other-directed and inauthentic. But deep in the human spirit is a consciousness that one is self-determining and responsible. We know that *we do make ourselves* by our own free choices. No matter how hard we try to escape, we know that we must live with this awful burden of freedom.

Authentic and Inauthentic Existence

Being-in-the-World. According to the existentialists, knowing or understanding is neither subjective nor objective. My being-in-the-world is not the awareness of either an empty ego or of something out there which I observe. Rather, my awareness is a *Dasein*, a "being-there" in a concrete situation. My awareness is always that of being in a situation, being confronted with possibilities. Heidegger would rephrase Descartes' "I think, therefore I am" in terms such as "I think *something*, therefore *I am in a world.*" My being-in-the-world discloses the givenness, the naked reality of a situation into which I have been thrown. Myself and the world are given together. And my immediate relation to this situation, confronting this world, is not theoretical or objective but existential.

The situation is characterized by what Heidegger calls Care (*Sorge*). For my awareness of the world is never an awareness of mere things, objects, substances in extension, but of things immediately present to my concern. They are present to me as instruments for my use, as objects of practical intention. This does not mean that things do not exist independently of me. What is is there, whether present to my awareness or not. But what is (*das Seiende*) only becomes *an intelligible world* through our human ordering or "projective understanding." Things in themselves are meaningless.

Furthermore, our relation to the world, or human awareness in its primordiality, is not characterized by rational or theoretical conceptualization but by certain moods or feelings. These feelings are not to be judged *merely* subjective. They are modes of real disclosure. Among these feelings, the most important is what Kierkegaard called "dread" and what Heidegger calls "anxiety."

Anxiety. Anxiety is a quality of human existence that the existentialists have analyzed at great length. Anxiety, first of all, should not be confused with fear. Fear, as an affective state, always has something in the world as its object. According to Heidegger, it is for this reason a disclosure of inauthentic existence because it represents a spirit of bondage to the world. Anxiety (*Angst*), on the other hand, is that which discloses to the individual the radicalness of his or her finitude and freedom. Anxiety has no specific object. It is simply the awareness or awakening to the stark reality of one's existence—one's thrownness into the world and one's responsibility for one's finite freedom. Dread or anxiety discloses that we are not at home in the world, that the world is by itself indifferent and without meaning. Genuine dread will necessarily shatter one's contentment and unreflective security, for it will throw the self back upon its own possibilities.

So conceived, anxiety is the necessary precondition of authentic existence, for in anxiety finite freedom becomes conscious of itself and arouses the self to decision and action. Without the experience of dread one never faces the crisis, the break with the world of the everyday. One continues to live a life of inauthenticity, of bondage through busy involvement in "worldly" concern.

Depersonalization. "Worldly" concern leads inevitably to a dehumanized world. Our being-in-the-world is, for the existentialists, "being-with-others" (*Mitsein*). Community belongs to being-in-the-world, for persons are not mere objects to be used as instruments of self-aggrandizement. "Worldly" care, however, transforms our relations with persons into relations with objects. An objectification involves a movement toward depersonalization and an inauthentic "being-with-others." It is what Martin Buber calls the relationship of I and It. It leads to a condition of dominance and dependence, of manipulation and alienation.

Depersonalization, when it becomes a social condition, is characterized by certain features. It is the society of "das Man" or mass man—no longer a community but what Kierkegaard calls a "public" or "crowd"—a collection of other-directed automatons. It is human life leveled down to the average, to the cliché. Life in such a society has no firm position; it is in a state of ceaseless flux, of everywhere and nowhere. The existentialists from Kierkegaard to Marcel have described the condition of mass man with great

power and truth. Marcel, for example, describes the modern industrial worker as follows:

> Surely everything both within him and outside him conspires to identify this man with his functions—meaning not only his functions as worker, as trade union member or as voter, but his vital functions as well. The rather horrible expression "time-table" perfectly describes his life. So many hours for each function. Sleep too is a function which must be discharged, so that the other functions may be exercised in their turn. The same with pleasure, with relaxation; it is logical that the weekly allowance of recreation should be determined by an expert on hygiene. . . . It is natural that the individual should be overhauled at regular intervals like a watch. . . . The hospital plays the part of an inspection bench or the repair shop. . . . As for death, it becomes objectively and functionally the scrapping of what has ceased to be of use and must be written off as a total loss.[5]

This mechanization of personal existence is powerfully described in Jaspers's *Man in the Modern Age*. Jaspers raises the question whether freedom is still a real possibility in our technological society.

> The basic problem of our time is whether an independent human being in his self-comprehended destiny is still possible. . . . Perhaps freedom has only existed for a real but passing moment between two immeasurably long periods of sleep, of which the first period was that of the life of nature, and the second period was that of the life of technology. If so, human existence must die out . . . in a more radical sense than ever before. . . .[6]

It is just this kind of threat that directs the existentialists' attention to what they call the limit-situations of life.

Limit-Situations. There are situations in human existence that we have not chosen and that confront us with the radical openness and alienness of being-in-the-world. These are what Jaspers has called "limit-situations." The most important of these are chance, guilt, and death. They are inescapable conditions of human life that, nevertheless, resist amelioration. They inject into our life a sickening feeling of danger and insecurity and make us conscious of our fragility and homelessness.

Rationalists have always tried to explain away these situations, but evil, guilt, and death are inevitable realities. Guilt, for example, cannot be escaped. Some try to avoid it by refraining from action. But blood on the conscience is inescapable, if blood on one's hands is not. Whether we act or not, we incur guilt. The authentic person will acknowledge his or her share of guilt and take responsibility for it. It will cause suffering, but the individual will not run away from it or try to deny it.

The same is true of death. Death is inescapable but we constantly suppress the thought of it from our conscious mind. When it is necessary to speak of it, we refer to it euphemistically. We postpone facing this boundary by rationalizing that, although it is certain, it lies in the distant future. Life can proceed as usual. The truth, of course, is that death can come at any moment. Time to determine our goals and to pursue our plans is never certain.

The authentic response to the situation of death is to face the fact that our end can come at any moment and that, therefore, this fact is of momentous consequence. If faced, the fact of death can free us of all postponement; it can set before us the fullness of the present moment and the demand to give our lives a decisiveness and significance here and now before death robs us of this most precious of gifts. To concentrate on death is not morbid. Rather, it is indispensable to achieving freedom and authenticity. It is only by meditating on such limit-situations in life that we can be awakened to decision, to freedom, and, hence, to authentic existence.

It is not surprising that Existentialism has been a subject of special interest to philosophers of religion and theologians, especially Christians, for the themes of freedom, fallenness, evil, alienation, and authentic personal and corporate existence have been integral to the Christian vision of the human story from St. Paul to the present. Our exploration of the thought of the three

Christian existentialist thinkers begins with Gabriel Marcel.

GABRIEL MARCEL

Gabriel Marcel was born in Paris in 1889. His father was a cultured man who held high administrative positions in the Bibliothèque Nationale and the Musées Nationaux. Marcel's mother died when he was four, and he was raised by a moralistic Protestant aunt. He thus grew up in a proper French bourgeois home and attributed his turn toward abstract and idealistic philosophy in the *lycée* and at the Sorbonne to his strict puritanical childhood. Involvement in the horrors of World War I, locating missing soldiers as a member of the Red Cross, helped free Marcel of his love of abstraction and was instrumental in turning him toward a literary career. Most of his adult life was lived as a writer, critic, and freelance intellectual. He converted to Roman Catholicism at the age of forty. Although his new faith had its imprint on his philosophical investigations, he did not consider himself, nor did he wish to be thought of as, a "Catholic" philosopher.

Marcel believed that both Idealism and Empiricism had led us down blind paths and had forced us into metaphysical positions that fail to take account of our true existential situation. Idealism places the mind in a position of an absolute, impersonal observer, when in fact the mind cannot stand outside its own thought and treat it as an object. Because we are engaged *in* being, no purely objective knowledge or judgment of being is possible. The empiricists have also forced us into a philosophical dead end. By dividing the mind from the external world, they have left us in a continuous quandary as to the genuineness of our knowledge of the world outside the ego.

Marcel refuses to split up reality in this way. What is metaphysically indubitable is the self incarnate in a body and present *in* the world. My body is not something that I have or possess; it is not something external to me but simply my mode of presence to the world. I cannot, for instance, think of my body as nonexistent. For Marcel it is the primary given of metaphysics. All thought takes place *within* existence. Hence existence must be assumed from the start; it is the existential indubitable. The self-being-together-with-the-world is the primary datum of metaphysics. It cannot be proved but it must be assumed.

It is clear that *to be*, for Marcel, means *to participate* in being. For to be is to enter into some sort of commerce with the world. Our existence as given is trans-subjective, which means philosophically that we should not begin our reflection with the Cartesian "I think" but with the "we are," the communion that binds me to others and in so doing gives me my real self.

Marcel acknowledges that this ontological participation can express very different modes of relation. Like the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, Marcel sees a stage of participation that is characterized by experiencing and utilizing. This is comparable to Buber's I-It relationships. But human beings must be awakened out of this stage into that of authentic ontological communion or genuine personal encounter. In real communion neither the self (I) nor the other (Thou) can be reduced to mere objects, i.e., sums of certain definable characteristics. The self and the other are both irreducible mysteries. What is irreducible is primary and cannot be expressed in terms other than itself. Thus ontological communion or participation is finally nonobjectifiable; it is a mystery.

What has occurred in the modern world is a loss of communion, of participation or the sense of *presence*. Marcel calls this the loss of "ontological weight." We have reduced human relations and tasks to the status of problems to be treated and resolved as objective things. This has led to the widespread depersonalization of life with all its attendant horrors, raising the specter of a *Brave New World*.

In discussing the modes of ontological relation, Marcel distinguishes between the kind of reflection that is appropriate to the sciences and that which is appropriate to reflection on human relations. The distinction is between a problem and a mystery. According to Marcel, a problem is something that is open to solution by