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Existentialism: The Theistic Thread

JAMES T. GRIFFIN

IN two previous articles we discussed the origins of existentialism in Kierkegaard and Nietzsche¹ and the atheistic stream of the movement as represented by Heidegger and Sartre². The present article is a discussion of the development of theistic existentialism stemming from Kierkegaard and found in remarkable fashion in Karl Jaspers and Gabriel Marcel.

JASPERS

Jaspers is by far the most abstract and systematic of the existentialists. He does not write in journals or for the stage but submits his thought to the rigor of philosophical exposition. He has a tremendous respect for the history of philosophy. For him existentialism is not something esoteric or sectarian; it is a particular, contemporary determination of perennial philosophy.

A general explanation of his viewpoint is available in his three-volume work, *PHILOSOPHY*, written in 1932. It is a summary of his convictions on philosophical problems, developed during the previous decades. A sharp critic of racism and excessive nationalism, he was removed from teaching by

¹ "The Fathers of Existentialism," *PHILIPPINE STUDIES* VI/2 (June, 1958), 155-164.

² "Existentialism: the Atheistic Thread," *ibid.* VIII/1 (January, 1960), 75-81.

the Nazis. He was restored to the University of Heidelberg by the Allied Forces, but more recently he has accepted a professorship in the University of Basel in Switzerland, where he is working on a four-volume work called *PHILOSOPHICAL LOGIC*. His object in this work is to restate his whole philosophy from the standpoint of the common relation which all modes of being and understanding bear to an all-inclusive reason. It should prove to be a definite synthesis of his whole philosophy of existence.

Jaspers is a man of wide interests: he has studied medicine, psychology, psychiatry, and has had practical clinical experience which produced two works, one on psychopathology (*ALLGEMEINE PSYCHOPATHOLOGIE*) and another on the psychology of different philosophies of life (*PSYCHOLOGIE DER WELTANSCHAUUNGEN*). His intellectual ancestors include not only Kierkegaard and Nietzsche but Plotinus, Spinoza, Schelling and above all Kant—for Jaspers, the philosopher par excellence.

Where does philosophy begin? Not with an inquiry into being but into the specific situation in which the philosopher finds himself in the world. Being cannot be resolved by any rational analysis. No doctrine of being can by virtue of its rational force command universal assent. Everything that I experience as essentially real owes its reality to the fact that I exist as an individual. Therefore the primary philosophic task is to illuminate the personality of the one who asks the philosophic questions.

When I ask "What is being?" or "What am I?" my questions arise from my personally and historically determined situation. My answers will fit only this situation and cannot be of general and absolute validity. My situation contains some known and knowable elements, but also some unknown and unknowable elements. It is rooted in a long distant past which I find to be transitory and it reaches into an impenetrable future which will also pass. My present situation fills me with doubt and uncertainty and I am looking for a fixed point which will give me certainty, for an answer which will give me a firm hold on myself and on life.

Thus I search for a being whose existence is not exhausted in transitoriness and which may give permanency to my own. Science cannot discover this being, for the scope of science is mere facts and gives only a surface knowledge of the world. I am thrown back on myself who can say "I am" and philosophy starts with my personal existence.

My personal existence is contrasted with *Dasein*, the simple "being-there" of all reality. *Dasein* is the world, the pure givenness of the determined being of objects. There is also "human *Dasein*", as object among other objects which can be studied, described and explained in psychology and anthropology. Human *Dasein* is not existence, but man is his possible existence. Man is capable of taking steps, of making choices, of positing acts which either bring him nearer to the fulfillment of his being or carry him away toward nothingness.

How does possible existence attain to full self-possession? By an existential choice. Existential consciousness is the consciousness of personal freedom of choice, and in the act of choice, in the original spontaneity of my freedom, I recognize myself for the first time as my own true self. Thus freedom is the beginning and the end in the process of the illumination of existence. When I exercise my freedom I am fully myself; only in my free acts do I have certitude of absolute being. No other experience, aesthetic, sentimental, instinctive, intellectual is comparable to this. For everything lies before me in a fluid state of possibility and I by my *fiat* give actuality to one rather than to the others. I break out of *Dasein* and I decide what I choose to be.

This act of freedom is an absolute beginning, the origin of true personal authenticity. Freedom carries within it its own certitude. Instead of saying, with Descartes, "Cogito ergo sum," we must say "Eligo ergo sum."

But freedom itself is outside rational analysis and free choices are unconditioned and cannot result from any objective conflict of motives. Existential choice is not obedience to an objectively formulated imperative. Still it is not blind. It presupposes that there is consciousness of a law and a hierarchy of

values; but this is internal, a personal law, an internal imperative. Objective knowledge would mean constraint and not freedom. No action that is conditioned by an external motive or end is free; freedom is possible only in the absence of rational, objective knowledge. As he says, "The science of not knowing (*das Wissen des Nichtwissens*) is the condition of freedom."

Futhermore, since the world is inexhaustible in its content and can never be completely grasped by any science, I must act without acquiring a complete and exact knowledge of the world. Otherwise, I would never act. I would always be deliberating, refraining from acting, and hence refraining from living.

To be free means to be one's self; freedom is loyalty to oneself. Yet each man's history makes his freedom limited. Unlike Sartre who made human freedom absolute, Jaspers sees it limited by the individual's history. A person's whole past carries weight on the actual decisions of the present. Every decision places a new foundation for the formulation of my real historical self; I am bound by the decisive character of my choices. Thus every man has a sense of guilt because his present faults are rooted in some original choice.

Yet my existence is not so free and independent and personal that it can exist apart from *Dasein*, its natural environment. Thus there are two dangers: man may lose himself in *Dasein* as though it were the depth of being, or he may behave as though *Dasein* was unreal. Man should rather fill *Dasein* with his personal content, appropriating it, thus fusing the temporal with the eternal. Eternity is not the infinite extension of temporal existence, nor is it the plenitude of existence above and beyond time, nor an infinite duration after death. Rather eternity becomes incarnate in time by man's act of freedom in which the individual overcomes the constraints of his temporality by deciding himself in time for eternity. He seeks permanence in time: he achieves it by his unconditional act of freedom.

But it is not sufficient to be in possession of oneself. Unlike Sartre, Jaspers sees the need for communication with other ex-

istences. Other people are hell for Sartre; for Jaspers they are a help to self-realization. In the loving strife of communication a new richness of being is revealed: the desire for the unity of being is a bridge to union, to "being-with-the-other." The thing that moves to communication is not what the other person *has* but what the other person *is*. Thus the freedom of both parties is the core point: one wishes to reach the other on the ground of his freedom, where the original depth of being is revealed, seen and molded too in a reciprocal give-and-take of freedom.

Yet there is not fusion of existences: each retains his own personal freedom. The danger of modern man is that he will be absorbed in the mass of totalitarian soulless anonymity. Even in communication the existing individual must preserve the integrity of the self. His "being-with-others" must be a personal, voluntary engagement. I must love not mankind, but this human being.

Dasein is not enough for man, for it is incomplete, finite and transitory. The philosophic search looks for Being in its fullness. Thus Jaspers invokes the idea of transcendence which originates in the disquietude man experiences with *Dasein* and even with his efforts at communication. This becomes a sort of proof of the existence of God for Jaspers. Yet Jaspers rejects both the transcendent God of theism and the immanent God of Spinoza's pantheism. They are too ontological, implying that metaphysical truth is objectively established. Jaspers' existential philosophy rejects all such proofs of God as well as of a revealed religion which would imply that God has manifested himself once and for all in human history. He also opposes atheism and opts for a *tertium quid*, "philosophic faith." Through this philosophic faith I am open to transcendence. A faith-less philosopher is an existence-less philosopher. Being thus open I discover in the realities about me the handwriting of God. In the Bible we find many truths which give structure to this faith: the one God, the choice between good and evil, the emphasis on love, the presence of the eternal in finite man, the idea of an ordered but contingent universe, the idea of God as man's ultimate refuge. Thus man sees that the world is not founded on itself but points beyond itself.

Thus the world-orientation of *Dasein* and existential illumination of the ego are not enough; beyond them there is Absolute Transcendence. Human existence remains aware of its insufficiency; human freedom seeks its fulfillment, its perfection, its redemption in Transcendence. Man feels the nearness of God. God is present and in the most personal of all human acts the individual approaches God Who reveals Himself as *this individual's* God rather than the God of *all the world*. The aim of philosophic metaphysics is to prepare the way for this experience of Transcendence.

Each man, however, may refuse to catch this glimpse of Transcendence; he may choose to remain enclosed in *Dasein*, he may refuse to listen to the language of Transcendence. Such a man suffers shipwreck, yielding to despair. The tensions of life created by *Dasein* can lead to annihilation, to destruction. But such shipwreck is not necessary; man can use his freedom to achieve Transcendence.

MARCEL

Let us now turn to Gabriel Marcel who developed an existential philosophy before he became familiar with Kierkegaard, Heidegger or Jaspers. He was born in 1889. Although brought up without religion, the question of faith was ever the center of his interest. He was a lonely youth who lost his mother when he was four. He lived in a world created by his own prolific imagination. By eight he had written two plays and the theatre has never lost its fascination for him. For him drama and philosophic reflection are two summits of equal height.

His father had been a Catholic, but had become an agnostic. He believed that Catholic thought was antiquated and filled with superstitions. His guardian, an aunt, was a Jewess who embraced Protestantism. Thus his early life was one of great instability. He was to write later: "There is only one suffering: to be alone." How different this from Sartre to whom hell was "other people."

His feeling of oppression and emptiness in his environment both at home and in the *lycée* led him to take a profound in-

terest in the faith and religious feeling of others. He became preoccupied with the idea of God and wished to discover the inner structure of the act of faith. While working with the Red Cross in World War I he was deeply moved by the questions of grief-stricken parents of soldiers missing in action. He started to investigate parapsychology and to engage in spiritistic experiments. He defended the existence of God against Brunchvicg and when Francois Mauriac wrote to ask: "Why, after all, are you not one of us?" he felt this as a personal call and in 1929 became a convert to Catholicism.

Marcel starts his inquiry with the individual's experience of "being-in-the world." Being-in-the-world particularizes and limits me. How can I accept my human situation and make it the starting point of my becoming a human person? By steady contact with concrete reality, in personal engagement, and finally in a personal act of faith. Each man must be ready to stand in wonderment before the richness of reality.

The philosopher is a human being who seeks to illuminate the human situation. He begins with a phenomenological analysis but ends with an ontological goal. In a vital act I constitute myself as a person in my own human situation and at the same time I take cognizance of the history of the race and of the Creator-God. It is difficult to accept willingly this situation because it implies limitation. Speculative reason can never justify this humility before the instability and uncertainty of the human situation. Only an act of faith in which the person affirms the infinite personality of God can restore man to unity. He becomes aware of a divine vocation and this marks the birth of human personality and human freedom. I respond to a divine call to become a free person. Only the Fatherhood of God can make possible my becoming my true self. All the circumstances of my existence here and now do not come about by brute chance, but are the work of my Father God. Thus, in place of Sartre's *nausée* at the human situation, Marcel chooses humility. The basis for Christian existence is supratemporal and absolute. From the idea of God who wills me I pass to the idea of God who wills the world. I accept the limitations of both

myself and the world. My act of faith leads me to consecrate my life to God, to offer everything I am to Him Who gave it to me. Thus consecration becomes restitution. I offer to God what is His already. He is the Creator of the gift as He is the Creator of me. The whole world is a manifestation of Divine Existence—it is the Word of God addressed to man.

Sometimes I refuse to make this act of freedom, to choose; then I lose myself in the world, letting myself drift in the excitement and universal mobility around me. I can escape this impersonal life of collective Man by a triple engagement: by accepting my past, by confronting my present and by projecting my future. By this triple voluntary engagement I give meaning to myself, I become creative in my future. I give an enduring orientation to my life. And in these choices I am guided by a Light which, while transcendent, is more intimately present to me than I am to myself. Thus I accept humbly and freely my particular limited situation and thus embody in my personal concrete incarnation the creative intention of God who has willed me.

So for Marcel, as opposed to Sartre, man is not thrown into a hostile world and abandoned there. He is incarnate in the world and his way is illumined by certain values which also are incarnate in being. Values are not created by man (as Sartre held) but are to be met by man's choice. Values are a basis of choice and they become negated when a man refuses to choose them. By choosing them man reveals the enduring and appealing creativeness of man.

The sublime incarnation, of course, is the Incarnation of Christ. Man's two great aspirations — for the authentically human and divine — are fulfilled. In His humanity Christ is the incarnation of the maximal human measure. In His divinity Christ calls upon me to surpass all purely human dimensions in a movement of transcendence, a movement toward the fulfillment of all human aspirations. Having taken our departure from our temporal human existence we are drawn by Christ's Incarnation toward the supratemporal Divine Existence.

We should mention too Marcel's distinction between problems and mysteries. Problems concern the scientist; the philosopher is concerned with mystery. A problem is something which one hits upon, something which blocks one's way. It is wholly *devant moi* (in front of me). A mystery is something in which I find myself engaged, whose essence is not wholly to be in front of me. In the realm of mystery the distinction between *le devant moi* and *l'en-moi* loses all significance. So, the union of body and soul, the phenomena of evil, of love, of freedom, are all mysteries. In all these mysteries I am engaged in a drama in which I am involved. I must take a concrete approach to ontological mystery. Objective knowledge of being is impossible; rather such knowledge must be concrete. Because being as such cannot be described phenomenologically or be made an object of demonstration, it does not follow that agnosticism must result. Being is a presence of inexhaustible concreteness; it is constantly encountered in beings, in a real person, in this or that being. And the more we recognize the individual being *qua* individual the more we approach "being as such."

This encounter will enable me to discover not an object but THOU, an immediate presence. But I am free to reject this presence, to obliterate it, to leave it in the order of objects, or I may respond with fidelity, hope and love. This linkage is participation, the actuality of human rapports with "the other," with "thou," and with the "Absolute Thou (*Le Toi absolu*)". Thus God is an extremely personal God who can never become a mere He. God is not a problem, but a mystery to whom I must respond with faith (rather than refusal), with hope (rather than despair) and with love (rather than denial). Thus I give "creative attestation" to the presence of being.

Yet if God cannot be thought of as *lui* or *cela*, are we not lost in pure subjectivity? Not so, says Marcel, for the order of the divine mystery i.e., as ("he" or "it") is both transsubjective and transobjective. It is *sui generis*. God is the Way, the Truth and the Life so that it is not sufficient to say "it matters little what you *think* as long as you *live* as a Christian." Such a mode of thought is an offense against God who is the

Truth. For Marcel the religious struggle must be fought out on the territory of Truth. On this ground it will be won or lost. The saints who are faithful to the truth, even to the point of martyrdom for it and for Him, pray untiringly for those who have chosen the darkness.

To every man there is given this choice. It is clearly seen in the one uncertainty among all the possibles, namely death which is certain not only for the beings whom I love but also for me. This problem or mystery of "being-no-more" is escaped from by many who flee from it in horror and cowardice. Yet it is a reality and a certainty which no dialectic can change. Man is thus faced with the possibility of absolute despair—it is always a temptation. Yet human freedom can triumph over death by recognizing it as an appeal to being, an appeal which calls for my response that can carry me beyond death itself. I can employ my freedom to choose a devoted dedication, to love, which is the essential ontological gift. This is man's free response to the call of being. Thus human personality and human freedom are preserved in the supereminent reality of Divine Existence and Divine Love.

For Marcel the Superman of Nietzsche is no antidote against the collective Man whom Heidegger so feared. They are not far apart from each other. They are both symptoms of the disintegration of human personality. To escape the mass, the impersonality of *Das Man*, the individual must commit himself to the God-Man Who alone can save man from both *Das Man* and Nietzsche's Man-God.

CONCLUSION

Again we try to separate the chaff from wheat. We see a denial of objective norms and objectivity. We see a repudiation of any effort to construct a universally valid system. There is a distrust of the intellect on the part of Jaspers who praises the science of not knowing (*Das Wissen des Nichtwissens*), and finds refuge in philosophic faith. There also seems to be an immediate perception of God or at least of Transcendence.

From the wheat we might harvest a respect for personality and for the given reality, a respect which is true humility before God my Father who made me. Man must be rescued from the inhuman forces found in the modern technological world. There is need for genuine communication, for a greater responsibility in human relations. Others are not mere objects but persons whose individuality and freedom all must respect. Yet each man is limited and is *capax Dei* and can become a saint.