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THE **COMMITTED** **SELF**

An Introduction
to Existentialism
for Christians

VICTOR A. SHEPHERD



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What Is Existentialism?

Introduction: Existentialism as a Mode of Philosophizing

The first thing to note about Existentialism is that, unlike many other philosophies, it begins with the human person. It does not begin where the Aristotelian tradition begins, where Realism begins.¹ But neither is it a type of Idealism. Unlike Idealism, which begins with the human person but is interested primarily in mental processes, Existentialism is interested in the whole range of human existence. Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno said, “It is the man [or woman] who philosophizes.”² In other words, it is the *whole person* who philosophizes, not just the head. Other schools of philosophy, the Existentialists maintain, reduce humankind to a severed head; but it is not a severed head that philosophizes, it is the human self in the totality of its existence. Existentialism begins with the person, not as thinking subject engaged in detached reflection, but as existent—embodied, in the world, and having to act in the theatre of life where decision cannot be suspended.

Existentialism represents a departure from two major streams of traditional philosophy, Realism and Idealism. Idealism, in capsule form and for the purpose of distinguishing it from other schools of thought, is the notion that reality is mind-correlative or mind-coordinated: objects are not independent of the minds that perceive and categorize and think about them, but exist only in some way correlated to those mental

1. For the briefest discussion of Idealism and Realism I am indebted to *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: C.U.P, 1999), 412, 562-3.

2. Miguel de Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life*, trans. J. E. C. Flitch (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1990), 28.

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operations. Kant and Hegel are Idealists. Kant maintained that we never know any object as such but only as it is “for us,” as it appears to us, through categories engendered by our own minds and by which we order the welter of sense-perception. All we can know is appearances, because the structure of knowing is determined by the mind.

The other tradition, Realism, is the notion that objects exist independently of our own existence or our knowledge of them, and have properties independent of the concepts through which we understand them or the language we use to describe them. The whole Empiricist tradition, the tradition of scientific investigation arising largely from the Enlightenment, is Realist.

Generally speaking, Plato is an Idealist, while Aristotle is a Realist. According to Aristotle, there is nothing in the mind that was not first in the senses; all mental operations presuppose sense perception of some sort. Plato, by contrast, insists that there is a great deal in the mind that is not in the senses, because the intellect can apprehend the world of eternal forms—the good, the true, and the beautiful. The eternal forms may be embodied in material objects perceived by the senses, but the philosopher, at least, can apprehend the forms as such through the process of the intellect.

Existentialism is neither Realist nor Idealist. Unlike Realism, it does not consider persons and other things as existing somehow discretely, independent of one another. At the same time, it finds Idealism one-sidedly and unrealistically cerebral. The key point for an Existentialist is that it is the *whole person* who philosophizes, not just the head.

Existentialism also represents a departure in terms of its main themes or concerns. Traditionally, Western philosophy has been preoccupied with epistemology, that is, questions of knowing: What is it that we know? How can we know? What are the limits and conditions of knowing? In fact, epistemology has been the preoccupation not only of philosophy in the West but also of theology: What is it to know God? How do we know God? Is God knowable at all? If so, what are the limits of that knowing?³ Existentialism, on the other hand, eschews such

3. This takes it into a doctrine of revelation, of course, which has been a primary concern of theology from the Reformation onward.

speculations. It is concerned with matters of concrete human existence, such as the anguished and ambiguous ethical choices we regularly face, the prevalence of the absurd in life, the overwhelming arbitrariness of what is, and our inescapable mortality. It is preoccupied not with mental abstractions but with the inescapable conundrums of living, aspects of human existence that no reflection can forestall, deny, or avoid.

From Descartes on, a central concern of Western philosophy has been the self as thinking subject. Everyone has heard of the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum*, “I think, therefore I am.” The senses deceive all the time, said Descartes, but the one thing beyond doubt is the fact or truth that I am thinking. Even if I am reflecting on a deception produced by my senses, at least I can know for sure that I am thinking. Descartes therefore defines the human being as a thinking thing: the human is that which thinks (animals apparently not sharing humankind’s capacity for thought).

The Existentialist regards Descartes’ reasoning and conclusion, first of all, as shallow or one-dimensional. Human beings do many things that animals do not, such as cook their food and mate all year round. Why not say, then, that to be a human being is to be a cooking thing, or a copulating thing? Why not say, “I bury my dead, therefore I am”? Moreover, in saying, “I think, therefore I am,” Descartes is presupposing an “I”—a massive presupposition. The Existentialist asks, “Who is the I that thinks?” And as soon as you try to answer this question by reflecting on the I that thinks, the I is no longer the I that thinks, but an object of thought. Any attempt to get behind this introduces an infinite regression; by definition, no amount of reflection will disclose the I who is the subject and condition of that reflection. Then is the I that thinks the same as the self that acts? Does Descartes’ “I” allow us to know what sort of I it is? Sartre, for example, says that Descartes’ conclusion, “I am,” from an examination of self-consciousness, is logically unjustified; Descartes could have concluded only that *there is thinking*—a conclusion that gets us nowhere.⁴ Existentialists, then, find the Cartesian *cogito* to be indefensible as the starting point for philosophy.

4. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego*, trans. Forrest Williams and Robert Kirkpatrick (New York: Noonday Press, 1957), 45f.

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From a theological perspective, we would say that the “I” that I am is what God has created and addressed. The characteristic of the living God is that he speaks, and his address *constitutes* me as “I,” a subject. But for a philosopher who disregards this theological notion, where and how does the I or self arise? Existentialism is preoccupied with this discussion.

All Existentialists are also characterized by their refusal to sidestep the tragic or absurd element in life, the contradictions of human existence. In our youth we may not notice these contradictions, but the more we see of the world, the more we recognize that life abounds with absurdities and contradictions. Take, for example, the fact that the problem of infertility occupies the cutting edge of medicine, while at the same time medical ethics seeks to rationalize feticide and even (to all intents and purposes) infanticide as medical procedures: in a partial-birth abortion, a child whose head and body are extruded can be killed as long as its feet have not yet emerged. In one tragic instance, a woman who was pregnant with twins, one of which was found to have a serious defect while still in the womb, decided to abort the twin with the defect and carry the other to term; but the wrong twin was aborted. A newspaper account of the error persisted in using the word *fetus* for the unwanted twin that remained alive in the womb, while the defect-free twin that had been aborted was a *baby*, even though it was never born. There is an undeniable absurdity here of the kind that abounds everywhere in life. Existentialism refuses to sidestep such absurdities or rationalize them away.

“Nothingness” is another concern of Existentialists. Sartre, for instance, is best known for his work *Being and Nothingness* (*L’Être et le Néant*). Heidegger, too, says much about nothingness: “*Das Nichts nichtet*,” he writes; that is, nothing brings to nothing, or nothing reduces to nothing. Before anyone dismisses this as a near-pointless observation, we should note that Christian thought is also concerned with nothingness. For example, we believe that creation was fashioned by God out of nothing—not out of some kind of formless “stuff,” or out of his own being, but out of nothing at all. We find this notion difficult to grasp; we keep wanting to imagine some sort of raw material out of which God made the universe. But creation out of nothing is a

central doctrine for people of biblical faith, because it establishes both the independence of God from creation and his lordship over it.

Or take the commandment not to bear false witness, not to lie. A lie is a statement to which there corresponds nothing; there is no reality to which the statement refers. Is a lie something, then, or nothing? What is its ontological status? If a lie is strictly nothing, completely vacuous, then telling a lie must be no different from remaining silent. But telling a lie *is* different from remaining silent. When we tell a lie, have we not told something? Lies have terrifying power; they ruin people and reputations. Obviously a lie is nothing, in one sense, yet it is also something that can have tremendous effect. In the same way, is a vacuum something or nothing? By definition it is nothing, yet it has the power to suck in everything around it. Is nothingness *ever* merely nothing, then? Or is nothing also, somehow, something?

Existentialism is also concerned with finitude. God may be infinite, if he exists, but everything else is finite. Even the universe, though immeasurably large, is nonetheless finite. We humans are also finite, and this finitude—not only our inexorable mortality, but the limitedness of our power, understanding, and experience—is existentially problematic for us. No less so are guilt, alienation, and despair, all of which are characteristic concerns of Existentialism.

One of the most prominent themes for Existentialists is freedom, which they regard as essential to human existence. Animals may be biologically determined without remainder, but humans are not. We are, of course, subject to a certain degree of biological determination (among other kinds): if the level of our blood sugar falls, we faint; and if someone drives an ice pick into our brain, invariably we think differently (and likely are found to have a different “personality”). Yet biological determination is not definitive in human beings; nor are the many other determinations to which we are subject, such as gender or psychology or nationality. We always remain more than any one such determination or even the sum total of them. We are characterized by our ability to *choose*; and this freedom is what underlies our responsibility.

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We might say of a person who is acting shabbily that he is behaving inhumanly. Someone might rebuke him with the words, “For goodness’ sake, be a man!” as though he were not one. We never reproach any other creature in this way—for example, by saying to an alligator that is dismembering another animal, “Be an alligator!”—because other creatures cannot be anything else. But somehow, you and I can be human yet fail to be human at the same time. This seems paradoxical, like the nothing that is also something. Can we really be human and yet not be human? From a theological point of view we cannot, because the *imago Dei* can never be forfeited; it can be denied, contradicted, and defaced, but it can never be effaced or forfeited. The Existentialist, on the other hand, speaking philosophically, would say that if we forfeit or abdicate our freedom, our existence is not *authentically* human. Freedom, decision, integrity, responsibility, authenticity: these are the core of personal being, and hence central concerns of Existentialism.

Existentialism is concerned with the affective or emotional dimension of human existence. Most schools of philosophy tend not to be concerned with this, as philosophers like to think of themselves as affect-less, uninfluenced by emotion. The affective dimension has traditionally been assigned to psychology; psychology is interested in how people *feel*, whereas philosophers want to know how people *think*. This is a false dichotomy, however, because our thinking and feeling are bound up together to a far greater extent than we like to imagine. It takes very little to alter the way someone thinks in a given situation: all you have to do is threaten their self-interest or sense of security, or offend their pride. Touch their emotions, and their thinking changes accordingly. After all, in the long run do we not all think and act in conformity to what we *love*?

Once feeling or affect has been relegated to psychology, it moves into the social sciences as an object of quasi-scientific analysis. Existentialism, however, includes the emotional not as material for social science, but as an aspect of the lived human. Existentialist philosophy is always concerned with the human, not simply as detached thinker, but as *lived* human, involved and committed. Recognizing that our affective dimension has much to do with our self-commitment—that

is, our involvement in others and in the world at large—Existentialism is concerned especially with the feelings that hamper that self-commitment, such as anxiety, boredom, and “nausea.”

“Nausea,” it turns out, is another key theme in Existentialism, but not as the uncomfortable sensation in your stomach that makes you want to vomit. Nausea is the condition of feeling overwhelmed by the superfluity and sheer arbitrary givenness of what is. This is a big theme in Nietzsche’s work, and an even bigger one in Sartre’s: in Sartre’s famous novel *La Nausée*, the distressing issue is that there is no reason for what is, and no meaning to it; it just *is*. The sheer superfluity of being, inherently meaningless, spills over everywhere. Why should that tree behind me be a pine tree rather than a maple? And why should it be there instead of ten feet to the left, or ten feet to the right? And why is there anything at all? Ultimately, there is no reason. There is simply a randomness, a glut of meaningless being, of *facticity*,⁵ that the Existentialist finds overwhelming.

Existentialism Contrasted with Other Philosophies

It will help to understand Existentialism if we put it side by side with other major schools of philosophy and see how they differ.⁶ Take Empiricism, for example. Its method is detachment for the sake of observation. You as scientific observer are detached from the peanut in front of you, the object you are looking at. Moreover, as an observer you are concerned particularly with nonhuman things: rocks, microbes, reptiles, weather—or, in the case of the social sciences, the human with humanness subtracted, the human made quantifiable. Just as you can measure blood pressure and cell multiplication, you can measure how many people in a group do X or Y, and whether that figure is higher or lower in a crowd, in a prison, or on a ship. The social sciences deal with things that are quantifiable, but to the extent that behaviour is quantifiable, you have abstracted humanness from the human. In

5. The notion of *facticity* will be explored more fully below.

6. In the following paragraphs I have been stimulated by John Macquarrie, *Existentialism* (London: Penguin Books, 1973), 26–34.

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other words, the Empiricist, who is concerned with objectivity and measurement, never deals with humans in their *humanness*.

Existentialism is just the opposite: it is *always* concerned with what is specifically, uniquely human—not what we share with animals, not the behaviour of nameless people in a crowd, and not what we are in terms of the sum total of our biological, economic, and social determinations, but the specifically, irreducibly human self.

According to Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev, Empiricism triumphs wherever Existentialism is ignored,⁷ with unfortunate results. The first result is that the object is estranged from the subject. The best instance of this today is the environmental crisis, where human beings are experiencing the terrifying consequences of hundreds of years of estrangement from the rest of nature. Second, the unrepeatably particular person is absorbed in the universal; the individual human disappears into the mass of humanity, the social class, or the nation. Third, freedom is crushed and concealed, and multiple determinisms are deemed definitive.

We must acknowledge, of course, that (as noted earlier) there *are* multiple determinations, operative for every one of us: I am a male; I have no perception at all as to what it is to be a woman, because I cannot get out of my maleness. A gender determination is operative there. I also happen to be white, in a society in which it is easy to be white: there is a racial determination to me that I, at least, find non-problematic. I am a Christian and a clergyman, so I am subject to a religious and professional determination. I am socially influenced by the fact that I belong to the middle class. All of these determinations are operative, but they are not *definitive*: I cannot be reduced to the sum total of these determinations. Berdyaev says that where Existentialism is ignored, people are *reduced* to their multiple determinations, which then become determinisms.

The fourth consequence of the triumph of Empiricism, says Berdyaev, is the destruction of character through socialization. Social existence finally comes down to what we share with the crowd and how our behaviour is formed by the crowd: how the mob renders us moblike so that we fit into the mould. Character is submerged. In short,

7. Referred to in Macquarrie, *Existentialism*, 27.

everything championed by Existentialism—human self-commitment, particularity, freedom, character—is buried by Empiricism.

The relationship of Existentialism to Humanism is a little more complex. Humanism is not, strictly speaking, a philosophy. Renaissance Humanism, which prevailed from approximately 1450 to 1650, signalled the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of modernity, which was followed by the Enlightenment. Renaissance Humanism was primarily a literary movement, crowned by poetry (there was a chair of Poetry in every humanist university), and it produced very little philosophy as such—in fact, its contempt for Aristotle, and for the stifling metaphysical hair-splitting characteristic of medieval philosophy, gave it a distinctly counter-philosophical tone. But it did become a worldview. Sartre has famously asserted that Existentialism is a kind of Humanism.⁸ However, Existentialist philosophers find the usual expression of Humanism too one-sidedly rosy, even Pollyannaish, and insufficiently critical in its understanding of the human being. Humanism magnified human richness, especially as nourished by literature and the arts; it saw the human being in a positive, optimistic light, and regarded human existence as eminently sensible. Existentialists, by contrast, see human existence as immersed in contradiction and absurdity. They are more intent on wrestling with evil, alienation, despair, and death, and with the way that death in the future reaches back into the present to unhinge everything.

Pragmatism has certain features in common with Existentialism: like Existentialism, it protests against abstract intellectualism, and maintains that the demands of concrete life force us to make decisions before we can complete a rational analysis of them or arrive at theoretical grounds for them. We must make decisions every day without being able to gather all the information we would like. What we would all like to do when faced with a major decision is suspend it until we have more information. But how much is more, and how much is enough? The truth of the matter is, we have no way of knowing how much relevant

8. Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, trans. Philip Mairet (London: Methuen & Co., 1948). Note that for Sartre, Humanism entails atheism. This was not the case with Renaissance Humanists, many of whom were Christian.

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information is available, or whether any of it is available. Yet these decisions ultimately concern our total existence, and avoiding them is not an option: we may be unable to make up our mind, but we cannot help making up our life, because we will end up doing something (or nothing—which, remember, is a kind of something). If we say, “I can’t decide whether or not I should study tonight; I just can’t make up my mind,” then we have already made it up: we will not be studying. Some people say they are unable to decide whether to marry or remain single, but as long as they dither, they have made up their life: they are single. It is impossible not to decide, say the Existentialists. Even if you decide to suspend your freedom for now, and let whatever happens happen, that, too, is a decision that you make freely. Moreover, it is an ignoble decision, because it means that you are living in bad faith,⁹ pretending that you are not free.

But whereas Pragmatists agree with Existentialists about the unavoidability of deciding, the Pragmatists’ criteria for decision-making are biological and utilitarian, with virtually no concern for what Existentialism calls “inwardness.” Inwardness sounds like a highly abstract, semi-Romantic, psychological notion, but it is a dimension of human being that deeply concerns Existentialist philosophy, although different philosophers understand it differently. For Kierkegaard, who was a Christian, inwardness is one’s relation to oneself before God.¹⁰ Not only do I relate to my neighbour, to my family, and to the world at large, but I also relate to myself. I think about myself; I relate to myself. The way that I relate to myself *before God* is what Kierkegaard calls “inwardness.” Obviously, nontheistic Existentialists will have a different understanding of the concept, but it figures largely in the thinking of all of them. To eschew inwardness is to live in shallow phoniness. Eight hours a day spent mindlessly in front of the TV, for example, would involve minimal inwardness; anyone who did that would be considered a pitiful instance of a human being by Existentialists. What can a person

9. Exactly what is meant by “bad faith” will be specified below, especially in the chapter on Sartre.

10. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 390.

be after hours of TV, except little more than a ghost or phantasm, a shallow phony? Moreover, insists the Existentialist, such a person is accountable for being a shallow phony; no one twisted his arm into watching TV. He could have turned it off, or pulled out the plug. But Pragmatism, knowing nothing of inwardness, does not trouble itself with such issues.

Like Humanism, Pragmatism tends to be more optimistic than Existentialism. Pragmatism was developed by Charles Sanders Peirce at the turn of the twentieth century in America. It was easy to feel positive about humankind in that place and time; Americans had had no devastating war in their own nation since the Civil War. But those living in Europe fifty years later, in the time and place where Existentialism arose, had had war after war after war on their own soil—especially World War I and World War II, followed by the Cold War. People in Europe at mid-century did not feel so unqualifiedly positive about human existence; on the contrary, they had discovered that *having* to act as a true human was excruciating. Existentialism maintains that acting in truth is painful and disruptive, and may even involve martyrdom. It costs everything to be authentic, and nothing to belong to “the herd.”¹¹ Pragmatism does not understand this cost.

Nihilism, on the other hand, is extreme skepticism, the denial of meaning and truth. The word *Nihilism* comes from the Latin *nihil*, meaning “nothing.” According to the Nihilist, there is no substance to traditional social, political, moral, or religious values; they are meaningless. Certain Existentialists are sometimes called Nihilists, particularly Camus, Sartre, Heidegger, and Nietzsche, because they offer a fundamental critique of traditional value systems. In fact, however, all of these Existentialists *deny* Nihilism, because they advance a philosophy that promotes human integrity and authenticity. Obviously they find meaning somewhere for human existence. On the other side of seeming Nihilism, they see new possibilities for existing, a new understanding of truth, and a “transvaluation of values.”¹²

11. See chapters 6 and 7 for Nietzsche’s use of “the herd.”

12. For more on Nietzsche’s use of this expression see chapters 6 and 7.

The above is an expression frequently used by Nietzsche, who maintains that Western values, which are a carryover from Christianity, need to be “transvalued” because they are degrading: they promote self-loathing, exalt weakness, and lead to bitterness and resentment. He points out that the earliest Christians (for example, in Corinth) came from the lowest classes of society, including the slave class, resulting in a slave mentality in Christian ethics: we cower before God as “miserable offenders,”¹³ believing that we deserve condemnation, and grovel for forgiveness. It is a pathetic valuation of human existence, says Nietzsche. Moreover, because the earliest Christians were from the underclass, they envied and resented the privilege of their social superiors. This resentment¹⁴ seeped into the Western tradition: there is, says Nietzsche, a characteristic contempt in Christian ethics for worldly success, for wealth, for the power others wield; historically, Christians have paraded this contempt as virtue when it is nothing more than thinly disguised resentment. Even the convention of kneeling to pray was repulsive to Nietzsche. It is ostensibly a sign of submission to God, but he explained it as merely a holdover from the peasantry kneeling before their earthly superiors, a humiliation which was then projected onto God.¹⁵ The Christian value system is an exercise in human self-rejection; it promotes self-loathing as virtue, and should be jettisoned.

Nietzsche has identified something important here. Christians tout humility as paramount, but they frequently express it in terms of self-belittlement: “I am nothing; I am a worm, I am a miserable wretch.” Genuine humility is not self-belittlement or self-rejection, but self-forgetfulness. As long as you are belittling yourself, you are preoccupied with yourself; you may say you are nothing, but in insisting on your

13. Nietzsche would bristle at this language in the *Book of Common Prayer*. At the same time he would have failed to grasp what it has in mind.

14. *Ressentiment* in Nietzsche’s writing; he wrote in German, but retained this French word.

15. For this reason the Puritans, who repudiated that humiliation, refused to kneel for prayer. Jews also do not kneel to pray; they stand, believing that prayer is a response to the God who has spoken to us, and that his address dignifies us. Occasionally people in the Bible are said to kneel at prayer, but this is a sign of overwhelming distress and not the usual posture. Jesus knelt in Gethsemane, and Daniel knelt in exile because he was devastated by the situation of his people. But normally, Jews have stood to pray, right up to the present day.

own nothingness you remain self-preoccupied and so make yourself everything. Moreover, so-called humility is often a cover for abdicating proper human initiative; it degenerates into lack of resolve, and ends up exalting weakness. Hence Nietzsche and other Existentialists—including Kierkegaard—said that the values in Christian Western culture need to be transvalued. But it was not as Nihilists that they said so.

Distinctive Features of Existentialism

The whole philosophical tradition stemming from Plato privileges essence over existence. Reason ignores what is changeable, contingent, and particular in favour of what is unchanging, eternal or necessary, and universal. Traditionally, therefore, philosophy has concerned itself with humankind in general rather than with individual human existence. But Existentialism is concerned with the concrete specificity of the individual's existence, which it considers more real than humankind or any putative human “essence.” Humankind is an abstraction; some people would even say it does not exist. We have all met specific persons, but has anyone ever met humankind? If not, then does it exist at all? And if it does not exist, why are we preoccupied with it? Existentialism, on the other hand, always insists on the priority of existence over essence, reversing or inverting the philosophical tradition. For Plato, the form of something, in the eternal world of forms, has a reality more profound than that of the object which embodies it. Existentialist tradition inverts this: it is the concrete, the particular, that is real.

To exist—*existere* in Latin, literally “to stand out”—is specifically to stand out from *nothing*, because *nothing* threatens us at every moment. We are always tempted to surrender our freedom—as if we could—because it is too great a burden. We want to surrender our responsibility, because we would rather not be answerable for our actions. *Nothingness* laps at us every moment, and to exist is to stand out from that nothingness. There is an old Christian hymn that says, “Oh to be nothing, nothing...Only to lie at His feet.”¹⁶ All Christians, of course,

16. Georgiana M. Taylor. Each of the three stanzas begins, “Oh, to be nothing, nothing!” *Victorious Life Hymns* (Dayton, OH: Heritage Music Press, 1975), #45.

want to be rendered useful to God, but what is he to do with nothing? Of what use to him is nothing? For the Existentialist, an aspiration to be nothing is a complete abdication of being human. To exist is to be someone, to be self-enacted, to stand out from nothing.

We are back again to the question of nothing, because it is so important in Existentialist thought. What do we understand by nothing? If nothing is nothing, can there be anything in it to understand? We can understand a chair, a pop can, or a rock, because it is something; but can we understand nothing?

We can ask the same question about evil, another preoccupation of Existentialism. What is it? Everyone has been, at some point, a victim of evil, and everyone has been a perpetrator of evil; we know that it is something, and that it is terrible. But if God is good, and his creation is good, what is the origin of evil? Does it have any ontological status at all? Is it amenable to our understanding? People say that evil is the corruption of what is good. We can understand that; we can understand a corrupted good. But surely evil as such, evil for the sake of evil, cannot be thus explained or understood. One aspect of evil's evilness is its incomprehensibility, its sheer unintelligibility. To just the extent that an event can be understood, it fails to be evil; if it can be understood, then there is a reason for it. Influential everywhere, evil appears to be something, yet as "nothing" it is utterly un-understandable, groundless, and meaningless.

Non-Existentialist philosophies aim at an intellectual grasp or conceptualization of reality. Existentialist philosophy, on the other hand, maintains that reality cannot be intellectually grasped. The only thing that can be grasped intellectually is that which is artificially abstract; what is concrete can never be intellectually grasped; it can only be lived. The difference is like that between being married and reading a book on marriage: the reality of marriage is the interpenetration of two specific lives committed to each other in a relationship they aspire to let nothing terminate except death. No amount of reading a book on it will yield the reality, just as no amount of reading a book on swimming will make you a swimmer: at some point, you must let go of assorted securities and risk all by jumping into the deep end of the pool.

If reality cannot be grasped intellectually, neither can it be conveyed by direct communication. We can directly communicate statements, truths, propositions, principles—but not reality. For that, indirect communication is essential. Think about the difference between fiction, or literature generally, and philosophy as traditionally practised. The abstraction that is in my mind I endeavour to communicate to your mind; we sit and discuss Plato's theory of the forms, or Kant and the transcendental unity of apperception, and try to finesse the concepts so as to make clear by our words and arguments what we mean. We ask one another, "Do you see? Do you understand?" and answer one another, "Oh, yes, I get it." We are communicating directly something that is itself no more than a concept, and a highly abstract one at that.

But fiction, or poetry, communicates indirectly by inviting us into a reality that we *live* by means of the imagination. As a philosophy student I took only one course in English literature in my entire university career, but I often ate lunch with students who were majoring in English literature. I thought they were soft in the head: I was a philosopher, a rigorous thinker, whereas they merely filled their heads with emotional mush spewed onto a page. And then in 1963 I read Northrop Frye's informative little book *The Educated Imagination*, in which he describes how literature functions.¹⁷ Literature creates a world, and the writer invites your participation: you will not understand what the novel is about unless you step into that created world and live in it. Once I perceived this, the world of literature was suddenly delivered into my hands.

I also started reading parts of the Bible besides the epistles. The epistles are highly abstract: "In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself." "Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."¹⁸ But in the gospels, Jesus walks along, engaging living persons in the course of his daily encounters, some of whom accost him with questions like: "Why do you eat with ne'er-do-wells?" Jesus never answers them with an argument or explanation. He

17. Northrop Frye, *The Educated Imagination* (Toronto: CBC Publications, 1963).

18. 2 Corinthians 5:19 and Romans 5:1, respectively. Unless indicated otherwise, all biblical quotations are from the Revised Standard Version (Oxford: O.U.P., 1973).

does not say, “I’ll tell you why; here’s the reason.” Instead he spins a yarn beginning, “Once upon a time a man had two sons. And he said to one...” and so on. The parables of our Lord are pure fiction, but they are his favourite means of communicating. He never communicates directly, because the reality of the Kingdom of God is such that while it can be pointed to, described, and commended, it cannot be conveyed intellectually and so known at a distance, from the outside; it cannot be known until we step into it. The traditional philosopher thinks we can know something while remaining detached from it, and would even say that detachment from it is the *condition* of knowing it; the Existentialist, by contrast, says that commitment to something is the condition not only of knowing it, but also of knowing oneself as transformed by it. Jesus’ answer seems to confirm this. To those who will not commit themselves to the Kingdom until the Master has proved its nature and presence, he only says, “You want a sign of the Kingdom so that you can decide in advance whether it is worth entering or not. There is no sign. Either you abandon yourself to it, or you will never know. To commit yourself unconditionally to the Kingdom is to know both Kingdom and self; to withhold such surrender is to know neither.”

The conversation in John 10 is another good example. People say to Jesus in John 10:24, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.” Jesus does not take pity on these people who are uncomfortable being kept in suspense, and say to them, “All right. I’ll tell you if I am the Christ or not. Listen up....” Rather, he insists he will not tell them. And the reason is that if he tells them he is the Christ, they will say, “Oh, good, because some of us thought you were.” And if he tells them he is not the Christ, they’ll say, “Oh, too bad; some of us thought you were.” But either way they are no different. The only way they will ever know whether Jesus is the Christ is through committing themselves to him.

Again, ponder Mark 8:12. Jesus asks, “Why does this generation seek a sign? Truly, I say to you, no sign shall be given to this generation.” People want a sign; that is, they want Jesus to authenticate himself to them independently of their commitment to him. He refuses. He says, “I will not authenticate myself to you and leave you detached

from me. The only way you will know who I am is if you abandon yourself to me. As long as you do not abandon yourself to me, you will never know who I am, no matter what I say or do.” Prior to a commitment to Jesus, no sign is sufficient; following such a commitment, all signs are superfluous.

Once I moved past my inexcusable prejudice against imaginative literature (thanks to Northrop Frye), the gospels came alive for me—and so did the Old Testament, because so much of it is cast in the form of story. Nearly all evangelical preaching comes out of the epistles, because their explicit reference to concepts like justification or reconciliation makes them seem like an easier way to communicate than preaching from the gospels or the Old Testament narratives. But Jesus invites us to *live in* the reality of justification by telling us the story of two men who go to the temple to pray: it is the second one, the reprehensible person devoid of moral merit, who goes home justified. Similarly the truth of reconciliation is grasped existentially through Jesus’ action as he pulls the contemptible Zacchaeus out of the tree and invites himself over to lunch in Zacchaeus’ house—the outcome of which is that Zacchaeus is rightly related to God.

In short: reality, according to Existentialism, can be pointed to, commended, or urged on others, but it cannot be communicated. Martin Luther said that everyone has to do his own believing, just as everyone has to do his own dying. Similarly, Jesus says that only you can enter the Kingdom of God for yourself. And only you, says the Existentialist, can exercise your own unforfeitable freedom so as to become an authentic self.

The question that metaphysics asks is: What is real? Metaphysics asks about reality abstractly and speculatively. But the question that Existentialism asks is: On what am I willing to stake my life? And none of us is going to stake our life on an abstraction. We stake our life only on that which is utterly real for us. Neither abstraction nor speculation nor mere concept meets that criterion.

The reality that Existentialism commends is not unknowable. It can be known, but it is known by experience, and the evidence of this knowledge is personal transformation. Here we encounter another

distinctive feature of Existentialist philosophy. If I were to ask you, “Do you know pain? Do you really know pain?” I would not be asking whether you have a scientific understanding of the neurophysiology of pain, how it works, what sort of thing is likely to cause it, and what its function is. I am asking, first of all, whether you have had much experience of pain; and secondly, whether that experience of pain has been so intense and profound as to make you forever different. You know pain to just the extent that it has made you different.

Similarly, what does the prophet mean by the question, “Do you know God?” It is not a question whether you can pass a Systematic Theology examination. The prophet is really asking, “Have you encountered God? Do you have an experience of God? And is your life forever different as a result?” When Isaiah says on behalf of God, “This people, Israel, does not know me,” he is not complaining that they lack theological information—the Israelites are the best theologians in the world—but that their lives remain unaltered by an experience of God. They remain unaltered because, despite their theological sophistication, they have yet to meet the One of whom theology speaks, the One to whom it points. They do not know God.

For the Empiricist, to know is to have information about the properties of something. But knowing persons, or knowing God, is never a matter of acquiring information about properties; it is a matter of being transformed by an encounter with someone. Martin Buber's writing is characterized by this notion, as we shall see. I have been married forty-five years, and if you were to ask me whether I know my wife, I could tell you that she is five feet tall, weighs hundred and five pounds, and speaks French, all of which is true. I would be giving you information about her, the same information that is knowable by anyone, but I would not be answering your question. The question, “Do you know your wife? What do you know of your wife?” is answered in this way: “What I know of my wife is exactly the difference that living with her has made to me.” If I have lived with her for forty-five years and am no different for it, then I do not know her at all, regardless of how much information I have. In an Empiricist or Enlightenment model of knowing, knowledge is information gained from detached

observation of an object, but in an Existentialist model, knowledge is personal transformation undergone through the commitment of a subject to another subject. There is no object; knowledge involves the commitment of a subject to another subject.

Note that knowing of this kind is no less *knowing*. There is more than one form of knowing. We live in a society so infatuated with scientism¹⁹ that we tend to assume an Empiricist model as the *only* model of knowing. It is indeed one kind of knowing, and an important kind, but not the most important kind. What is the information gained about any object, compared to the transformation of yourself through intimacy with a fellow human? Our society is reluctant to use the word *knowledge* for this. But the Existentialist says that, on the contrary, it is the only kind of knowledge worth anything. Kierkegaard faults the church relentlessly for having substituted intellectual apprehension of doctrine for intimacy with the One of whom doctrine speaks. To be sure, we should never minimize the place of doctrine, for doctrinal truths describe the Lord who is Truth (in the sense of “reality,” as in John’s gospel). Yet however much doctrine *describes* Jesus Christ and *points to* him, it can never *convey* him. Only the Holy Spirit conveys Jesus Christ to us, and does so only in the course of our abandoning ourselves to him.

Moreover, real knowledge, according to the Existentialist model, arises only with the radical commitment of the *whole person*. Intellectual commitment is necessary, but it will never suffice. Knowledge of reality arises only through the radical commitment of the whole person, because it is only in such commitment that reality itself occurs. In other words, strictly speaking, we do not come to know an already-existing reality; rather, the reality *arises only in the instant of our knowing it*. This is different, of course, from all Empiricist models: if you are examining the properties of aluminum in a laboratory, says the Empiricist, the aluminum exists independently of your knowing it and is unchanged by your knowing it. But in an Existentialist model of knowing, the reality

19. Scientism is (among other things) the illegitimate encroachment of the scientific method into non-empirical areas of life, with the result, for instance, that scientific knowing is deemed to be the only mode of knowing.

is not that which you apprehend; rather, the reality *occurs* or *arises* in the course of your commitment.

Buber, a Jewish Existentialist thinker, presses this point with respect to God. On the one hand, God exists independently of us. However, says Buber, we have no access to God in himself independent of our engagement with him; in fact, we do not even know there is a God to engage with until we engage with him. Reality for Buber is what he calls “the between.” It is the encounter, the engagement between God and us, the small-s subject with the capital-S Subject.

We have noted that for all Existentialists, theistic or not, reality is not simply apprehended; strictly speaking, it *occurs* in the moment of self-commitment. Reality, in this view, is not the same thing as actuality. The objects in our environment are elements of actuality. To say that a desk is actual is to say that it is not imaginary or mythological. But is it *real*? From a Christian perspective, reality is the effectual presence of Jesus Christ in his engagement with us, drawing us into intimacy with himself. From a nontheistic Existentialist position, reality is the transformation that occurs in our existence in the course of our self-commitment to someone or something. This squares with Buber’s understanding of what it means to know someone, according to which the measure of our knowledge of someone else is precisely the difference made in us by our unreserved engagement with that person. In other words, in an Existentialist model, to know is always to be transformed, and that process of transformation is reality.

Consider the Hebrew notion of **תשובה** (*teshuva*), or repentance. In the Christian tradition, as Nietzsche liked to remind us, repentance has typically meant feeling wretched about oneself. But in the Hebrew, *teshuva* means to make a 180-degree turn, to turn around, to make an aboutface that re-oriens us towards God in fresh commitment to him. Fallen human beings do not seek God, although they think they do; we have to be turned around to face God. Since we customarily flee God, repentance is a turn back towards him. The Hebrew Bible has three major metaphors for repentance, and every one of them has to do with relationship, with reviving one’s commitment to another person. The first is an adulterous wife returning to her husband (we could just

as easily say, an adulterous husband returning to his wife); the second is idolaters returning to the true and living God; and the third is rebel subjects returning to their rightful ruler.

The adulterous wife who returns to her husband has violated him and disgraced herself, but she returns to long-standing, patient, freely-accepting love. When idolaters put away their idols to worship the Lord, they are turning from what Hebrew calls “the nothings” (literally) to the real, true, living God.²⁰ And when rebel subjects return to their rightful ruler, they turn from disorder and chaos to order and integrity. The Bible understands all of these radical transformations as commitments to a relationship. While I am not suggesting that a straight line can be drawn from Existentialist philosophy to the Hebrew Bible or to the ministry of Jesus, there are clearly more than a few affinities.

We have observed that, according to the Existentialist, knowing is transformative and is impossible without radical commitment. The next crucial point to note is that, in the course of such a radical, transformative commitment, the self is forged. Before that, you are a pre-self, a non-self, a sub-self, or a ghostly self. The self is “forged” according to Sartre, and “chosen” according to Kierkegaard, but for both, it arises from commitment. Recall that Existentialism opposes all forms of Essentialism, which sees the self, or human nature, as given. It is not the case, say the Existentialists, that everybody has a self: rather, one *becomes* a self. Nor is there a human nature that determines our behaviour: for Existentialists, blaming human nature is an indefensible evasion. Nobody *has* to behave in a particular way. There is no generalized, universal human nature which is given, only a self that you enact. That is why Existentialists speak of the human ‘condition’ rather than of a human ‘nature.’

It is true, of course, that things in our personal history, especially our childhood, have shaped us to some degree. There are many things about my childhood and my upbringing that I relish and want to perpetuate, and many other things that I want to avoid duplicating

20. Incidentally, this brings us back to the Existentialist preoccupation with nothingness. An idol is by definition nothing, in that no deity corresponds to it. But just like a lie, it is a ‘nothing’ that is also, in some sense, something, and exerts power over people.

in my own parenting. The Existentialists would call all such matters "facticity." These are things we cannot change, but we can always choose the way we respond to them.

Facticity also includes external circumstances. For example, you may be out hiking one day and come upon a steep hill.²¹ A variety of responses are possible. You may decide the hill is too steep and the day too hot, and turn back. Or you may say to yourself, "This is a wonderful challenge! I wonder how fast I can run up that hill?" Or you may reflect on the fact that the purpose of your hike was to get to a village five miles away, and the hill is no more than a minor impediment on the way. But the one thing you cannot say is that the hill made you turn back, or that it defeated you, or that it made you do anything at all, because the hill is non-essential; it is mere facticity. You did not have to respond to it in the way you did. Of course, neither could you have moved the hill, or reduced its size. The Existentialist would maintain that, like the hill on your hike, many features of the world are unchangeable aspects of our facticity; after all, only a deranged person believes he can create a world of his own imagining. But we do have an irreducible, inalienable freedom with respect to our response—and therefore responsibility with respect to that response.

Responsibility is a heavy burden. Sartre did much of his writing during the German occupation of France, where people who were found to have joined the Resistance movement were tortured and executed. Many people were sympathetic to the Resistance movement, but stood on the sidelines and did not join; they collaborated with the Nazi occupation instead. "What choice did we have?" they said. "We just wanted to survive until the war ended. And if this meant capitulating to Nazism for the time being, what alternative did we have?" Others, however, belied this rationalization by making a different choice. Jacques Ellul, a lawyer, sociologist, historian, and Protestant Christian thinker, joined the French Resistance even though the British strongly urged people not to do so because the cost outweighed the

21. Sartre has made this illustration notorious. He refers to it and examples like it throughout Part Four, "Having, Doing and Being," of *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: The Citadel Press, 1965).

return in terms of helping the war effort: the Resistance actually accomplished very little in turning the tide of the war, and its members were tortured and killed if discovered by the Nazis. After the war, Ellul was asked why he had joined. He replied that if he had not, he could not have lived with himself; he would not have known who he was, would not even have *been* a self. The military efficacy of the Resistance, and the risk of torture or death, did not finally matter as much to him as the significance of that choice in becoming a self.

We *always* have a choice, says Sartre, though it may carry a heavy price. That is something we often prefer not to hear. In many situations, we would rather pretend that we have no choice, that our background and past experiences have deprived us of the ability to choose. The Existentialist will have none of that. Existentialism, far more than most philosophy, is concerned with the self and the forging or choosing of the self, and maintains that it is only in committing oneself that one becomes a self.

Notice again the similarity here with biblical teaching—especially in the terms used by Kierkegaard, who was a Christian. Kierkegaard spoke of self-abandonment, or surrender of the self, as the condition of becoming a self. What else is Jesus saying when he declares that you gain your life only when you lose it, and that whoever tries to preserve his life forfeits it? Kierkegaard even goes so far as to say, paradoxically, that self-abandonment *is* the self. Only in the act of radical commitment do we become the self we then recognize, in the light of which we also recognize the non-self we were before. Peter says to Jesus, “We have left everything and followed you.”²² Here Peter anticipates the Existentialist, because until we make that commitment of leaving everything, of self-abandonment in the midst of what others regard as radical insecurity, we are not a self at all.

Socrates is an illustration of this kind of commitment, even though he was not a Christian; he lived in the pre-Christian era, and there is much in his philosophy that a Christian cannot agree with. Socrates was imprisoned by the Athenians for his teaching, and was told that his life would be spared if he recanted. He refused. His friends, seeing that

22. Mark 10:28.

he would not recant, offered to sneak him out of jail and into another country, and so save his life. He refused that as well. These two choices, his refusal to recant and his refusal to escape, indicate that he was so utterly committed to the reality of which he spoke that he *was* that reality. He had staked his very self on it.

One might well ask, at this point, whether it matters at all to the Existentialist that we abandon ourselves to one thing or person rather than another. That is, are all commitments of similar value? Given equal levels of commitment, is the mobster as authentic as the missionary? Existentialist ethics, as will be seen in the chapter on Sartre, maintains that the exercise of my freedom ought not to curtail anyone else's; and, no less telling, that the choice I make concerning myself I implicitly make for all.²³ One thing we can say on behalf of the Existentialist is that even a commitment to what someone else regards as an improper end is nonetheless a self-forging and a self-forming. We choose the self we become. It is not that we choose among alternative available selves, like a child at an ice cream counter looking at all the flavours and choosing the one she fancies. Rather, in the act of self-commitment the self arises for the first time in our lives.

Presuppositions of Existentialism

Obviously, Existentialism rejects determinism. We are free to make decisions, in the sense that we are not finally determined biologically, psychologically, politically, and so on. We are all subject to many kinds of determinations; but these manifold determinations do not add up to determinism.

Second, Existentialism holds freedom to be inalienable. We are condemned to be free, says Sartre; we cannot repudiate our freedom. Anyone with Christian theological training will recognize two different understandings of freedom here; in any case, however, according to Existentialism freedom is something we cannot abdicate. We are entirely responsible, and cannot blame anybody or anything for our decisions. Nor can we avoid deciding: not to decide is itself a decision.

23. This concept is explained further in chapter 11.

Third, meaning does not inhere in things independently. Meaning is not given to us by features of the thing we are contemplating, nor created by an articulation of concepts; rather, meaning is brought forth by our response. The meaning of an event, encounter, or opportunity is forged in a response-as-commitment, and is disclosed in the transformation of the person who experiences it. That which makes no difference to one's *life* has no meaning, no *human* significance.

In light of the above, it is less important to try to understand something, such as evil, than to respond to it. As was noted earlier, to the extent that evil is meaningful, it is not evil. Consider the Holocaust, for example, and the millions of people who were gassed and whose remains were incinerated in the crematoria, or the millions of children who were simply thrown *alive* into the crematoria. To claim to have found meaning in it is to trivialize the event and demean its victims. One of the mythologies of our society is that everything in the world must ultimately be made transparent to our understanding. For Existentialism, however, meaning always pertains more to response than to understanding. Hence the question we ought to be asking about evil is not: What does it mean? but rather: What are we going to do about it? What is our response to horror that paralyzes comprehension even while our responsibility in the face of it is undeniable?

The features and assumptions we have been talking about can be illustrated in the following way. Consider the statement, "All humans are mortal."²⁴ Everybody agrees with that; we all know we're going to die one day. But now suppose you are told, "You are going to die today." This bites a little more, because there is a turning from the universal to the particular, from the objective to the personal, and from the abstract to the concrete. And if Jesus says to you, "Fool, this night your life is required of you," that bites even more, because now there is a turning from mere statement of fact to a call to responsibility. And now, suppose you decide to change your priorities because of this, to do certain things and speak to certain people in your life: this is a turning from detached reflection to committed response. These five turnings capture the heart

24. For several illustrations I am indebted to Roger L. Shinn, *The Existentialist Posture* (New York: Association Press, 1959), 15–18.

of Existentialist thought. In this fivefold turning, for the first time in your life, your *self* appears, because it now *is*; it can appear only once it has come to *be*. Prior to that, you were a potential self, a putative self, a semi-self, or a ghostly self, but you were never real. Only now, in this fivefold turning, have you become real.

When the Existentialists say that you were not real before this fivefold turning, they are not denying your facticity or actuality. There was always an actual you, weighing so many pounds, living in this or that place, member of a certain social class, and so on. These things are not nothing, but they are not *you*, they are not the *real* you, your self. Until this fivefold turning occurs, the real you has not appeared, because it has not yet been forged.

How one understands the foregoing hinges on whether one is a Christian (theistic) Existentialist or a secular (atheistic) Existentialist. From the point of view of biblical theology, fallen human beings are nevertheless human; they have not become something less than human, or some other kind of creature. But there is something grossly defective about the fallen human being. The image of God in which we were created can never be forfeited or effaced, but it can be tarnished, and it can be defaced. Every fallen human being is made in the likeness and image of God, but that image is so pathetically defaced that it provides no transparent insight into God's nature. My brother is made in the image and likeness of God, and that image cannot be forfeited; therefore I have no excuse for ever treating him as less than fully human. But the image of God in him is not evident, and in that sense one might describe it as "nothing"; it does not correspond to the reality it is intended to reflect. There is a recognition in Christian Existentialism that, while no human being is a nothing, we become our real self—we find our real identity—only in the act of abandoning that self to Christ in radical commitment.²⁵

25. C.S. Lewis' discussion of hell gives an insight into the Christian notion of selfhood, or lack of selfhood. He talks about hell as the state wherein one becomes radically depersonalized—not psychologically, in the sense that one *feels* depersonalized, but in an ontic sense, so that one exists somehow only as a subperson in a sort of shadowy existence. See C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (Glasgow: Fontana Books, 1972).

Threats to Selfhood

Existentialists are keenly aware of threats to selfhood. One such threat is the common identification of human beings as machines, as neurologically programmed. The growing edge of psychology today is neuropsychology, which often risks reducing psychological states and events to neurological impulses in the brain by a sort of neurobiological determinism. If this is the last word about the human, then we are mechanistically determined, whether we like to think so or not. This understanding is reflected in the current aim of technological innovation to approximate ever more closely the thinking and decision-making of a human being. If, to all intents and purposes, we are machines, what is the self?

Another threat to selfhood is our tendency to seek comfort above all else. A great deal of so-called common sense is mere comfort-seeking. What people mean when they say, "Well, it only stands to reason..." is that we understand the behaviour of anybody who promotes her own comfort, and find irrational the behaviour of someone who is not preoccupied with her own comfort. If we are fundamentally comfort-seekers, there is no place for guilt, anguish, or sacrifice, whereas these things are key to what Existentialism is finally all about: they are the furnace in which the self is forged.

Yet another threat to selfhood is the view of the human as commodity, as a thing that supplies labour to the process of production, rather than as a person who labours. We all recognize Karl Marx as the thinker who most notably exposed this threat. Marx thought that, prior to the revolution, people exist in a kind of subhuman, shadowy state, thoroughly determined by their capitalistic overlords, and that only through revolutionary activity do they become selves. He maintained that by collapsing ourselves into our labour, we reify, objectify, or "thingify" ourselves, so that we become depersonalized and alienated from ourselves. And once reified and self-alienated, we can become a self only through radical commitment to the revolution. Marx was not considered an Existentialist thinker, but there is enough overlap to conclude that he is at least a semi-Existentialist: certainly he shares Existentialism's criticism of Hegel.

Then there is the view of humans as animals. There is more than a little truth to this view. In the biblical story of Creation, human beings and warm-blooded animals are made on the same day; they are both “sixth-day creatures,” as it were. Moreover, we are not the only creatures whom God loves, because God also loves the animals; he protects them and provides for them. If it is not the love of God that distinguishes human beings from animals, what does? According to Scripture, it is the *address* of God: everywhere in the Bible, human beings are the only creatures to whom God speaks. We are the only creature to whom God relates via *word*. We do not know how he relates to the other animals, but he relates to humans by means of word, and pre-eminently in the Word become flesh.

There are very significant commonalities between animal psychology and human psychology. Those who think they are wonderfully superior to the beasts do not know whereof they speak; they are denying their own creatureliness. If we are deprived of certain physical requirements, for example, we become very suggestible—a fact exploited by cults in their methods of indoctrination. People who are kept hungry or denied access to the toilet will believe anything they are told, and people who are not allowed to sleep will soon lose their ability to think properly. Casinos commonly do not have windows, so that patrons cannot see when it is getting late; they continue to gamble, because they lose their sense of the passage of time. The air is superoxygenated, keeping everyone unnaturally alert so that there are no bodily cues (such as fatigue) to tell them they should stop gambling and return home. In short, we are biologically influenced to an extent that is easily taken advantage of.

Some people use this commonality as grounds for declaring that we are no more than animals, but that is not true from a Christian perspective. Christians and theists would say that human beings differ from animals in that we are made in the image of God and are the recipients of God’s address. Existentialists who are not theists would say that we are distinguished by our self-consciousness, which gives us the capacity for reflection and abstraction. An animal has consciousness, but it does not have the neural complexity that supports self-consciousness.

It may even be able to recognize words of human language: the most intelligent dog has a vocabulary of about 200 words, but they are all words that pertain to things in its immediate environment, like *slipper*, *newspaper*, *walk*, and *water*. A dog has no capacity for reflection or abstraction. The shift from consciousness to self-consciousness is huge, and for many Existentialists, it is in that shift from consciousness to self-consciousness that human uniqueness lies.²⁶ The Christian, while acknowledging the uniqueness of human self-consciousness, would say that the image of God in us cannot be reduced without remainder to self-consciousness; rather, self-consciousness is a precipitate or predicate of God's address to us.

Theistic and Atheistic Expressions of Existentialism

All theistic Existentialists insist on a distinction between religion and faith. Kierkegaard presses this point tirelessly. In the Bible, the prophet Elijah stands on Mount Carmel with the priests of Baal. He does not see the encounter as a contest of religions, the religion of Baal versus the religion of Yahweh, as if they were two things of the same order. Rather, he proclaims to the priests of Baal that Yahweh is going to act in such a way as to expose their deity for the utter non-entity that it is.²⁷ Religion, says Karl Barth, is humankind's attempt to justify itself before an arbitrary and capricious god; it is what people do to try to stay on the good side of a deity they are not too sure about. Faith, on the other hand, is our knowledge that God of his own free grace has already justified us.²⁸ This is a crucial distinction.

Jewish Existentialist thinker Martin Buber declared that modernity is open to religion but closed to faith.²⁹ There is no difference between these two in the eyes of most people, including most people in church; but for theistic Existentialists there is every difference. Regardless of the

26. Readers of Existentialist literature should be aware that it regularly uses the term *consciousness* to refer to self-consciousness.

27. See 1 Kings 18.

28. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* Vol. I, Part 2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1970), section 17, *passim*.

29. Martin Buber, *Eclipse of God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), chapter 5.

place given to great statements of theology, faith occurs only at the level of trust or commitment. At the time of the Reformation, faith was understood as understanding, assent, and trust—in Latin, *notitia*, *assensus*, and *fiducia*. First we must understand something of the gospel, however minimally; then we must say “Yes” to it, acknowledging that it is true. But then we must commit ourselves to it, abandon ourselves to it, and this is where faith really begins for both the Reformer³⁰ and the Existentialist. Of this *fiducia*, or trust, the biblical archetype in both testaments is Abraham. Abraham abandons himself to the God who is his only future, and for this reason Kierkegaard spends an enormous amount of time and thought on the example of Abraham.

Another way of understanding this is to notice the difference between faith as an act on our part and faith as content, the things we believe. The former is *fides qua creditur*, or that *by which* we believe—the act of believing, expressed as commitment and action. *Fides quae creditur* is *that which* we believe. What we believe is of course necessary for the act of believing, but it is never sufficient.

Objectivisms of every sort ask, What is truth? But Existentialism asks, Am I truth? Kierkegaard says that truth is “an objective uncertainty held fast in the appropriation process of the most passionate inwardness.”³¹ The “objective uncertainty” is God: there is no proof of him. But a Christian holds fast to this objective uncertainty in the most passionate inwardness. She will stake her life on the truth that God is and loves, even though she cannot prove it. That is what Kierkegaard means by “an objective uncertainty held fast in the appropriation process of the most passionate inwardness.” Kierkegaard also says that faith is precisely the contradiction between that passion of the individual’s inwardness and the objective uncertainty; your inwardness, recall, is

30. Luther maintained, “Faith resides in the personal pronouns,” by which he meant that as long as I say, “Jesus Christ is the Saviour of the world,” I remain remote from the Kingdom. When I can say from my heart, “Jesus Christ is *my* Saviour,” then I am a person of genuine faith. See, for instance, “A Meditation on Christ’s Passion” in Timothy F. Lull, ed., *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012).

31. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 203. For a statement that is virtually identical see p. 611.

your relationship to yourself before God, and that is everything for you when you have no proof of God at all.

This passion, and this recognition of objective uncertainty, are something we need to recover as Christians. What Kierkegaard deplores under the name *Christianity* is virtually the same as Nietzsche's "death of God": both men contend that Christianity has reduced God to a laughingstock. Kierkegaard, a Lutheran, remained a Christian nevertheless, whereas Nietzsche, whose father and grandfather were Lutheran ministers, did not—if he ever was one.

In addition to theistic Existentialism, there is *atheistic* Existentialism. This category includes people like Sartre, Camus, Beauvoir, and Nietzsche. Given Sartre's philosophical agenda, God's existence would be no more significant than his non-existence, for if authenticity arises solely through self-commitment, my self-commitment will make me authentic whether God exists or not. However, says Sartre, a God of the kind Christians apparently believe in—namely, One who is infinite transcendence, omniscience, and omnipotence—must be repudiated, because such a God, in his towering, overwhelming objectivity, would denature the human person; that is, he would reduce every human being to a *thing*. Such a God would leave no room for humans, making human authenticity impossible. Therefore, he must be denied. Christians have little patience for this kind of talk, but atheistic Existentialists must be heard; they hold up the mirror to Christian deficits. Perhaps God is not as Christians have traditionally described him.

Cautions and Commendations

Existentialism has reclaimed the orientation that, when combined with the logic of Scripture, characterizes the best of philosophy in the tradition of Socrates—namely, its insistence on courage and commitment, without which humans are mere wraiths. Existentialism also reminds us of life's complexities, contradictions, and absurdities.

Moreover, Existentialism prompts us to a healthy re-examination of traditional statements about God. Luther said at the Heidelberg Disputation of 1518 that the classical God—the God posited and espoused by those not informed by the gospel of God's self-definition

as Israel's crucified One—is indistinguishable from the devil.³² How many people have we met who uphold what can only be a satanic deity? Someone suffers from a severe physical or mental disability, or a community is wiped out by natural disaster, and people attribute it to the will of God. Such attribution only slanders God. Consider, rather, the incident in Luke's gospel where Jesus comes upon a woman who has been bent double for eighteen years. By that time many people have undoubtedly told her that her infirmity is the will of God and she must come to terms with it. Jesus, however, hisses, "Satan has done this," and straightens her.³³ Existentialists remind us that no relationship can be had with a putative God who is sheer power, sovereignty, transcendence, and impassivity. Only in Jesus Christ is the God of the gospel knowable.

At the same time, Existentialism must be embraced prudently. In rejecting conformity, bad faith, mediocrity, and so on, Existentialism can readily become a pose. Rebellion, protest, and resistance can become ends in themselves, and since they depend on having something to oppose, they tend to become parasitic. Some people who embrace popular Existentialism imagine, ridiculously, that it makes no difference what we commit ourselves to, as long as we are committed. The history and vocabulary of Existentialism easily lend themselves to mindless faddishness.

In addition, its concern for selfhood must not become the occasion or legitimization of aggressive egocentricity, as though in pursuing authentic selfhood I had the right to violate you.

Moreover, the whole notion of freedom in Existentialism is highly problematic. For Christians, freedom is the removal of every impediment to acting in accord with one's true nature as a child of God. In other words, to be *free* is always to have been *freed*—freed for the service of God and neighbour. Atheists, however, maintain that freedom is the capacity for self-determination. What precisely is the Existentialist notion of freedom, and how defensible is it? To what extent can it be reconciled with a Christian understanding of freedom?

32. Lull, *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, chapter 5.

33. Luke 13:17.

Also problematic is the notion that human decision alone creates the human ethical good. Theistic Existentialists would ask whether the good is synonymous with the godly.

Some forms of Existentialism, seemingly unaware that we become selves only in the context of human relations, are so preoccupied with self that they lose sight of the community. Self and community are polar correlates; that is, as Paul Tillich maintains, the self exists only in correlation with the world or community, and it is only in polar relation to a self that the world is world as opposed to a chaotic mass.³⁴ In other words, self and world are essential to each other. Some Existentialists fail to recognize this; among Christian Existentialists, that failure manifests as a weak ecclesiology.

Finally, Existentialism rightly recognizes the assorted determinations to which human reasoning is subject. There is no such thing as “pure” reason, and many Christians who naïvely vest their confidence in that mythical entity need to be reminded that our reasoning is affected by the Fall. However, atheistic Existentialism fails to understand that faith is a rational, albeit not a rationalistic, event; it is a reasonable human act and activity. Brought about by grace, it restores the integrity of reason that was collapsed by the Fall. In other words, so far from being irrational, the exercise of faith is consummately rational in that grace, owned in faith, delivers reason from the assorted rationalizations and social determinations to which it is subject in the wake of the Fall.³⁵ Freud, Marx, and the French sociologist Michel Foucault all made similar observations about reason and rationalization. Foucault in particular has shown conclusively that what passes for sound reasoning in any society—that is, what is deemed common sense—is the mindset of those who have access to social power. In short, what we call

34. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 168–171.

35. In the wake of the Fall, the structure of reason survives—we remain rational creatures, otherwise we would no longer be human—but the integrity of reasoning is compromised, with the result that much of what we call reasoning is rationalization. More will be said about this in subsequent chapters.

reasoning is highly socially configured. Only God's grace, owned in faith, heals reason of its bondage to rationalization and restores its integrity.

What can we take away from this overview of Existentialism? Earlier we discussed the impossibility of direct communication of reality. In view of that impossibility, we might think we have detected no little irony in the fact that Existentialists have themselves written reams—direct communication—on the forging of the self and on the necessity of self-commitment for knowledge of reality. Why, in that case, should we pay any attention to them, or give them any credence? What more do we know for listening to them, and how can we tell whether what they say is true? What meaning can it have for us who are only reading verbal descriptions at second hand? It may seem, in the end, that they have in effect failed to say anything significant. They would readily admit, however, that they cannot deliver what they are writing about. They are describing it, commending it, pointing to it, urging it; but by definition their writing cannot deliver it.

In this regard we do well to recall the situation where Jesus is confronted with the demand, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly."³⁶ He refuses, however, to reply directly—not because he wants to worsen their suspense, but because the reality he is *cannot* be communicated directly. Those who abandon themselves to him at incalculable risk (What if he turns out to be mistaken, or a charlatan?) will find both him and themselves "real," while those refusing such commitment will never know who he is or who they are. Jesus, we must remember, never directly said, "The kingdom *is*..." Instead he testified indirectly, "The kingdom *is like*..."—a fine pearl or a treasure hidden in a field, for which we give up everything to gain what can be possessed, cherished, and commended, but never conveyed.³⁷

36. John 10:24.

37. Matthew 13:44–45.