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Letter on Existentialism[1]

by

Frithjof Schuon

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THE Western mentality has given rise to four metaphysical perspectives which are either perfect or at least satisfactory as the case *may* be, namely: Platonism, including Neo-Platonism; Aristotelianism; Scholasticism; Palamism.

A question: Why was Kierkegaard neither Platonist, nor Aristotelian, nor Scholastic, nor Palamite? Is it because he was a Vedantist or a Mahayanist? Certainly not. Consequence: His doctrine is null and void. The proof of this is that he rejects "organized" Christianity, hence the traditional theology which upholds it, and he does so in favour of a subjectivism which is not intellectual (for in that case he would have acknowledged objective metaphysics whose mode of expression perforce is rational and abstract) but voluntaristic and sentimental; whence comes his subjectivistic or individualistic moralism, his insistence on thinking "existentially", his nullity from the point of view of the real and efficacious spirituality which saves.

The same remarks—*mutatis mutandis*—apply to Heidegger, with the aggravating circumstance that this decadent philosopher is no longer even Christian in any degree, being in fact, to put it briefly, an atheist; and what about the concept—completely antimetaphysical and hysterical—of anguish?

Pascal cannot be ranked among the existentialists; he was simply a believing rationalist unaware that the strict data for a metaphysical science pre-exist in pure Intellect; if Pascal is existentialist, then all fideism is existentialism, which is certainly not the case.

At no degree is existentialism constructive, for it has no right to criticise the abuse of a rationality whose nature it does not even perceive. If the existentialists' criticism of reason—or of rationalism—is justified, why do they not become Platonists or Vedantists? In fact, existentialism does not bring us one bit nearer the truth; to the rationalist error, which consists in reasoning about metaphysical or even simply cosmological realities in the absence of the indispensable intellectual data, existentialism adds the inverse error and substitutes, for reasoning good or bad, true or false, an experience which is in fact infra-intellectual, a cul-de-sac.

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[1] One of our readers, Professor Huston Smith of Syracuse University, N.Y., had sent us this extract from a letter addressed to him which he considers to be of too universal an interest not to be made generally known. The author has agreed to its publication.

Therefore, the existentialist movement, which is a blind reaction, gets us absolutely nowhere, and there is no point in saying that "Asia, not having severed reason from intellection, did not need an existentialist movement"; apart from the fact that India has indeed known some rationalists like the Châr vâkas, who in truth does need existentialism? For one cannot need something false, something which leads to nothing.

Having in mind Kierkegaard and others like him, such as Klages, for example, who passionately opposes "life" to "thought" and paradoxically enough does so by thinking, I wrote on the subject: "What can be said of a philosopher who 'thinks' blithely about the insincerity, or the mediocrity, of 'thought' as such?" Now the word "blithely" ("allégrement") in this case means: without scruples, without being aware of contradiction, without taking the trouble to reflect a little, without manifesting a modicum of objectivity; after all, why would an avowed subjectivist be objective? This has absolutely nothing to do with Kirkegaard's character, it being a question uniquely of the irresponsible style of his thought, his lack of a critical sense and his lack of a sense of proportion. He liquidated "organized Christianity" with a stroke of the pen; is not that enough? He had the pretension, like all philosophers, to claim to be presenting an adequate picture of the total truth and thus to be indicating a way; well, he was mistaken and must therefore be rejected without pity, I will even say: with horror. For the question of knowing if he was right in some point does not come up at all; every philosopher is right in some point, and this is totally without interest. What counts is the global doctrine, its claims and its consequences.

The case which Kierkegaard makes against rational thought could never coincide with the one I myself make against the mentality of fallen man, for I make my criticism in the name of the Intellect, of which Kierkegaard had not the slightest idea. No doubt I will be told that this thinker, if he did not make his criticism in the name of intellection, at least did so in the name of faith; but he was just as ignorant as to what constitutes true faith, since in the name of his faith he attacks theology, which is precisely an indispensable objectification and a *conditio sine qua non* of the faith of the heart. Kierkegaard's faith is individualistic, not sanctifying.

Kierkegaard doubtless had a deep respect for Socrates, but this is because he understood him very imperfectly; Socratic sincerity has other foundations than existentialist sincerism. In the same manner, the *Gelassenheit* of Heidegger could have neither the meaning nor the scope of Meister Eckhart's *Gelassenheit* of which it is merely a profane and individualistic counterfeit without any possible issue. "Ye shall know them by their fruits", said Christ.

Heidegger "seeks" a mode of knowledge which goes beyond discursive thought; this is all very well, but discursive thought is worth infinitely more in itself than anything that a Heidegger can conceive of, seek, or find.

It is obvious that Kierkegaard had to admit Revelation—namely the Bible—since he was a Protestant; he had a certain merit in being Christian, namely, in believing in Christ, in God, and

in eternal life; but he had no particular intellectual merit in admitting Revelation as a principle or phenomenon, for the existence of Revelation is truly the minimum that an adversary of "organized Christianity" can admit. Not to admit the fact of Revelation is to be a deist or an atheist.

The thing which is absolutely lacking with the existentialists, and which reduces to nothing their theories as well as their moral attitudes, is an objective truth which is metaphysically integral, whether it be an orthodox theology or an authentic metaphysics. All their partial merits thus fall into a void. "He that gathereth not with me scattereth," said Christ; the "me" here is the Logos, and it is Orthodoxy in the universal as well as the particular sense.

True, Kierkegaard observed that rationality when left to itself, or rationality without faith, namely "rationalism", leads nowhere; but then neither does his altogether subjective faith—his existentialism if you prefer—lead anywhere either; and if the objection is raised that this faith nonetheless derives its inspiration from the Gospel, I can reply that rationalism likewise takes its inspiration from certain sufficient data since man lives in a world which is relatively real. What the Gospel—arbitrarily reduced to the fancies of an individual—is for Kierkegaard, so is limited experience for the rationalists; and if the Danish philosopher—who was moreover a very poor theologian—took as his basis the Gospel, then why was he so far from realising the spirit of it? For his point of view even constrains him to become neither more nor less than a saint; yet in fact he was infinitely far from the sanctity of an Albert the Great or a Thomas Aquinas, both of whom completely accepted the rationality that he, the subjectivist, rejected.

Existentialism is a pernicious substitute for intellective contemplation and sanctity. If the existentialists—so imbued with sincerism—were really sincere, they would be saints or heroes and leave rationality in peace.

Certainly truths are to be found in all the philosophers, and above all half-truths, but these truths are flanked with errors and inconsistencies, and there is moreover no need for them; hence it is pointless to dwell on them. Partial truths are only to be accepted in the domain of traditional orthodoxy, because they are only acceptable in the context of the total Truth, which alone guarantees their exactitude and their efficacy. To think while denying the total Truth, which is both objective and subjective, is completely inconsistent; it is not really thinking.

The subjective can only be communicated by the objective. If Kierkegaard was right, faith would not be communicable; for in order to be communicated faith requires means which are objective, hence rational.

Truths embedded in errors are fraught indirectly with the venom of their erroneous context. Existentialism has in fact, whether it be Protestant or atheistic, promoted nothing except individualism; never the understanding of metaphysical doctrines, never sanctity!