

Introduction

(1974)

I have left this introduction pretty much as I wrote it, in 1974, in a burst of still youthful enthusiasm. I have only made a few minor alterations to bring it up-to-date and contemporize some of the examples.

1. It is a commonly accepted half-truth that existentialism is a revolt against traditional Western rationalistic philosophy. It is also a demonstrable half-truth that existentialist philosophy is very much a continuation and logical expansion of themes and problems in Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Marx, and Husserl. But two half-truths provide us with less than the whole truth. Existentialism is not simply a philosophy or a philosophical revolt. Existentialist philosophy is the explicit conceptual manifestation of an existential attitude—a spirit of “the present age.” It is a philosophical realization of a self-consciousness living in a “broken world” (Marcel), an “ambiguous world” (de Beauvoir), a “dislocated world” (Merleau-Ponty), a world into which we are “thrown” and “condemned” yet “abandoned” and “free” (Heidegger and Sartre), a world which appears to be indifferent or even “absurd” (Camus). It is an attitude that recognizes the unresolvable confusion of the human world, yet resists the all-too-human temptation to resolve the confusion by grasping toward whatever appears or can be made to appear firm or familiar—reason, God, nation, authority, history, work, tradition, or the “other-worldly,” whether of Plato, Christianity, or utopian fantasy.

Attitude
*// The existential attitude begins with a disoriented individual facing a confused world that she cannot accept. This disorientation and confusion is one of the by-products of the Renaissance, the Reformation, the growth of science, the decline of Church authority, the French Revolution, the growth of mass militarism and technocracy, two world wars, the “triumph” of capitalism, and the sudden onslaught of globalism and its

consequences, for which the world was clearly not prepared. In philosophical terms, the modern stress on "the individual" provided the key themes of the Enlightenment, the "Age of Reason," the philosophical rationalism of Descartes, Kant, and Hegel. In these authors, however, the theme of individual autonomy was synthesized and absorbed into a transcendental movement of reason. But in a contemporary culture that harps so persistently upon the themes of individual autonomy and freedom, there will always be individuals who carry these to their ultimate conclusion. Existentialism begins with the expression of a few such isolated individuals of genius, who find themselves cut adrift in the dangerous abyss between the harmony of Hegelian reason and the romantic celebration of the individual, between the warmth and comfort of the "collective idea" and the terror of finding oneself alone. Existentialism is this self-discovery. Its presupposition is always the Cartesian "I am" (not "I think"). Like its successor, "postmodernism" (which rejected even the "I"), existentialism marks the ever-increasing failure of modern humanity to find itself "at home" in the world.

2. So long as we think of philosophy as a set of (one hopes) objective propositions about nature, we will continue to be tempted by notions that philosophy can be a "science," that there is a correct way of doing philosophy, that a philosophical judgment or body of judgments can be true. If instead we allow ourselves to think of philosophy as *expression*, these rigid demands seem pointless or vulgar. Yet we surely do not want to reduce philosophy to *mere* expression, to autobiography or poetry, to "subjective truth" or psychic discharge. Although it is an expression of personal attitude, a philosophical statement is better compared to a piece of statuary than to a feeling or an attitude. The philosopher is a conceptual sculptor. He uses his language to give a shape to his prejudices and values, to give his attitudes a life of their own, outside of him, for the grasp of others. A philosophical statement, once made, is "in the world," free of its author, open to the public, a piece to be interpreted; it becomes universal. But "universal" does not mean universally *true*. Philosophical genius lies not in the discovery of universal truth, but in the seductiveness with which one molds his personal attitudes as ideas for others. The philosopher builds insight onto insight, illustration into argument, joins metaphysical slogan to concrete observation, perhaps using himself as an example, the entire age as a foil. Nevertheless, the philosophy is never merely a personal statement; if it is the individual that has made existentialist philosophy possible, it is also the case that existentialism has deepened our individualism. Nor is philosophy ever

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merely an epiphenomenon of cultural attitudes; it gives them shape and direction, creates them as well as expresses them.

3. Existential philosophy, perhaps like all philosophies, typically finds itself going in circles, trying to prove axioms with theorems, converting premises into methodological rules, using repetition and restatement in place of argument and illustration in place of proof. Here "the individual" appears as a conclusion, there as the presupposition, and there again as the rule. The existential attitude finds itself in syndromes, interpreting a feeling as a mark of identity, converting an insight about oneself into an interpretation of the world, resolving self-doubt by exaggerating the self in everything. The existential attitude is first of all an attitude of self-consciousness. One feels herself separated from the world, from other people. In isolation, one feels threatened, insignificant, meaningless, and in response demands significance through a bloated view of self. One constitutes herself as a hero, as an offense, as a prophet or anti-Christ, as a revolutionary, as unique. As a result of this self-exaggeration, the world becomes—whether apparently or "really" is irrelevant—more threatening. So one attacks the world, discovering, with both despair and joy, that its threats are themselves without ultimate meaning, that there are no moral facts, no good and evil, that "the highest values devalue themselves," and that the human world is typically, even essentially, a hypocritical world. And so one self-righteously finds herself as the creator of meaning, which heightens one's role as absurd hero, prophet, revolutionary, as "underground," rebel, saint—or buffoon. Then there is at least slight paranoia, me or us against the others, the authorities, the public, the herd, the bourgeoisie, the pharisees, the oppressors. As the world becomes more threatening, one is thrown into her exaggerated concept of self all the more; and as she becomes more self-conscious, the world becomes increasingly "hers". Then one begins to feel impotent in the face of the responsibility for "her" world; it becomes more apparent how indifferent the world is, how contingent its events, how utterly absurd. One feels isolated from others, and in desperate loneliness one seeks camaraderie, through rebellion, through art, through writing existential philosophy. In the existential syndrome every tension increases self-consciousness, every increase in self-consciousness exaggerates the irresolvable tension with the world that is always there. As the existentialist becomes more sophisticated, as her feelings become formulated into ideas, as the existential attitude becomes philosophy, it becomes a mantra for similar attitudes in others. When those attitudes finally manifest themselves in the sardonic irony of Kierkegaard, the utter loneliness of Niet-

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zsche's Zarathustra, the pathetic spitefulness of Dostoevsky's underground man, the struggle against nausea and "bad faith" in Sartre, the struggle for the heights in Camus's Sisyphus, these attitudes are no longer personal syndromes but widely accessible meanings that we can accept as our own.

4. According to many existentialists, every act and every attitude must be considered a choice. Yet the existential attitude itself is apparently not chosen. One finds oneself in it. Dostoevsky tells us that self-consciousness is a "disease"; Nietzsche adds, in his discussion of "bad conscience," that it is "a disease—but as pregnancy is a disease." Although many existentialists speak of the universality of "the human condition," this universality is itself a view from within an attitude which is less than universal. Most existentialists, no less than Descartes, Kant, and Hegel, take self-consciousness to be the home of a universal first truth about everyone. But self-consciousness itself is not universal, although once one becomes self-conscious, he cannot go back, no matter how he denies himself, drugs himself, *leaps* or *falls* away from himself (the terms, from Kierkegaard and Heidegger respectively, carry their evaluations with them). In *Utilitarianism*, John Stuart Mill argues for "quality" of pleasures by contrasting the dissatisfied Socrates with a satisfied pig. The first is preferable, Mill argues, because Socrates has experienced both Socratic pleasures and pig pleasures and he, like other men, has chosen to remain Socratic. Actually Socrates has no choice. He can *act like* a pig, but he cannot enjoy himself as one. Socrates can no more imagine the selfless indulgence of pig pleasure than the pig can appreciate the arguments of the *Apology*. Once expressed, the existential attitude appears as a universal condition, but only to those who can understand it. It is a peculiarly Western attitude, and talk of "the human condition" is as presumptuous as it is overdramatic. Perhaps that is why, for many of us, Hermann Hesse is convincing, even in the wild fantasies of his magic theater, but lyrically unpersuasive as he attempts to capture the selflessness of his Eastern Siddhartha. If we begin by understanding Siddhartha's quest, it is because we, like Hesse, understand quests. However, we may well have difficulty understanding the peace and satisfaction of Siddhartha's repetitive routine as a ferryman. Of course we, like Hesse, can moon for that selflessness as a dream, a nostalgia for something lost. But for us, even selflessness is something viewed self-consciously, something that would have to be striven for by each of us as an individual. The existential attitude is not universal, and existential philosophy is not a truth about the human condition. As Camus says, for many of us it is simply necessary.

5. Most of us have experienced this existential attitude at several points in our lives. A threat of imminent death—or even a passing thought of our own mortality—is sufficient to wrench us out of our current involvements—even if but for a moment—and force us to look at our lives. Like Sartre's characters in hell in *No Exit*, it is perhaps everyone's private dream to see her own funeral, to see her life after its completion. In life, however, there can be no such viewpoint, as Kierkegaard complains against Hegel, since "at no particular moment can I find the necessary resting place from which to understand [my life] backwards." Inevitably the thought of death prompts existential questions, What have I done? Who have I been? What have I wanted to be? Is there still time? But anxiety about death is only one preface to existential anxiety. As Camus tells us, "at any streetcorner the absurd can strike a man in the face." Imagine yourself involved in any one of those petty mechanical tasks which fill so much of our waking hours—washing the car, boiling an egg, changing a printer cartridge—when a friend appears with a new movie camera. No warning: "Do something!" she commands, and the camera is already whirring. A frozen shock of self-consciousness, embarrassment, and confusion. "Do something!" Well of course one was already doing something, but that is now seen as insignificant. And one is doing something just standing there, or perhaps indignantly protesting like a man caught with his pants down. At such moments one appreciates the immobilization of people on the street accosted by aggressive TV hosts such as David Letterman, that paralyzing self-consciousness in which no action seems meaningful. In desperation one *falls* back into her everyday task, or she *leaps* into an absurd posture directed only toward the camera. In either case, one feels absurd. One remains as aware of the camera as of her actions, and then of her actions viewed by the camera. It is the Kantian transcendental deduction with a 16mm lens: there is the inseparable polarity between self and object; but in this instance the self is out there, in the camera, but it is also the object. An "I am" (not an "I think") accompanies my every presentation. "How do I look?" No one knows the existential attitude better than a ham actor.

6. Enlarge this moment, so that the pressure of self-consciousness is sustained. Those who audition for "Reality TV" programs may or may not realize the pressure of such heightened self-consciousness over a period of days or even weeks or months. To be sure, many people today *live* to be on television, but the question is always how to present oneself, how to live one's life, even if one is not always playing to the camera. This becomes a problem for all of us. In self-consciousness we play to an audience or we play to a mirror. We enjoy making love, but always with

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the consciousness of how we appear to be enjoying ourselves. We think or suffer, but always with the consciousness of the "outer" significance of those thoughts or sufferings. A film of one's life: would it be a comedy? a tragedy? thrilling? boring? heartrending? Would it be, as Kierkegaard suggests, the film of "a life which put on the stage would have the audience weeping in ecstasy"? Would it be a film that you would be willing to see yourself? twice? infinitely? Or would eternal reruns force you to throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse this Nietzschean projectionist? And who would edit this extravagant film of every detail—of yet undetermined significances—of your life? How would the credits be distributed? Each of us finds himself in his own leading role—the hero, the protagonist, the buffoon. John Barth tells us that Hamlet could have been told from Polonius' point of view: "He didn't think he was a minor character in anything."

What does one do? "Be yourself!" An empty script; *myself* sounds like a mere word that points at "me" along with the camera. One wants to "let things happen," but in self-conscious reflection nothing ever "just happens." One seizes a plan (one chooses a self), and all at once one demands controls unimaginable in everyday life. Every demand becomes a need, yet every need is also seen as gratuitous. No one can predict all of the script-wrecking contingencies of real life. One cannot be an existential hero and also accept fate, yet no one is more aware of contingencies. Camus tells us that Sisyphus is happy, but perhaps he is so just because his routine is settled. He can afford to have scorn because his mythical reality is entirely structured within its predictable contingencies. Could Sisyphus remain the absurd hero if he had a normal life? How much does Camus' absurd hero and the existential attitude require the routine and leisure of the bourgeoisie? But then there would be no existentialists in foxholes.

7. The hero? The buffoon? Does any of us really think of herself that way? As Odysseus, Beowulf, James Bond, Woody Allen, perhaps not. But as the center, the one who endows all else with meaning, that is an attitude we recognize easily. Yet at the same instant we recognize ourselves as pelted by meanings, "sown on our path as thousands of little demands, like the signs which order us to keep off the grass" (Sartre). The existential attitude is the constant confusion of given meanings and our own.

As this confusion becomes better formulated, one begins to suspect an impossible dilemma. Today, I am Dr. Pangloss, and the world is spectacular; yesterday I was a Schopenhauerian fecal monist, grumbling over a fine wine in a rotten world. Each day values are given to me, but each

day I find changes to explain how yesterday's differing values depended on differences in the world. (Yesterday I was there, now I'm here; yesterday she was friendly, today she insulted me.) My friends assure me, typically, that what has changed is only me, and that yesterday's depression was a symptom of a very real problem. It is today that is the illusion; my happiness is merely another symptom of my problem. But the values remain a problem. They are outside of me. Then, the exaggerated insight: It is *all* me (mine). No one can be in the existential attitude without feeling sometimes the hero, sometimes the megalomaniac (Nietzsche: "I am dynamite"). But again, one need not, should not, take this attitude for the truth. The realization that "I am the world" is a necessary step in the awakening of self-consciousness. In the existentialists' self-conscious sense, perhaps a person has never really "existed" if she has never once seen herself as everything.

8. What is self-consciousness? According to some recent existentialists and almost all postmodernists, there is no *self* as such. And what is consciousness? "It is nothing," Sartre tells us, and for Heidegger it is not even worth mentioning. One looks at paradigm cases. One is self-conscious because of the camera, "he is self-conscious about his baldness." To be self-conscious is to be embarrassed, to be ill-at-ease. Or is that a peculiarly American paradigm? Descartes sees self-consciousness as a propositional attitude; consciousness of one's own existence seems in the light of reason to be not much different from a mathematical postulate. Hegel is centrally concerned with self-consciousness in his master-slave parable, but self-consciousness in Hegel carries with it a sense of dignity, pride, independence. We might well suspect that semantics is here becoming an ethology as well. What we begin to see, in our movie-making example as well as in Descartes and Hegel, is that self-consciousness is neither a subject aware nor an awareness of an object (the self) so much as it is a motivation, an attitude that illuminates the world as well as the individual in the world. Self-consciousness is not, strictly speaking, awareness of self, for there is no self. Rather, self-consciousness in the existential sense is this very recognition that there is no self. The self is an ideal, a chosen course of action and values, something one creates in the world. Self-consciousness does not add anything to consciousness; it is neither a Lockean "turning back on itself" nor a Cartesian reflective substance. Self-consciousness robs the world of its authority, its given values, and it robs consciousness of its innocence. Self-consciousness is not a premise or an object for study. It is rather the perspective within which existentialism attempts to focus itself.

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9. Existentialism is forced to be centrally concerned with problems of justification. In self-consciousness one holds all given values suspect. How much of reason might be no more than *our* reason, the anonymous consensus of "the public"? How many of our values might be no more than relics of dead authority or products of our weaknesses, our fears of isolation, failure, or meaninglessness? How many of our values are prejudices, how much reason mere rationalization? Nevertheless, to simply pronounce the nihilist thesis that the highest values are without justification is not sufficient. The problem, we hear from every author, is *to live*. And so we continue to seek courses of action. We look to Kant and try to act in a way that would universalize our principles of action for everyone. But that supposes that we can identify those features of our own action which would be so universalizable. And then, already caught in the existential attitude, each of us realizes that she is always an exception. I can accept moral principles by the tabletful, but I am always without the rule which teaches me to apply such principles to my own case. One is tempted to turn away from principles to the concrete—to her feelings and attitudes. Yet to do so, as Kant had already argued, is to give up morality. And which feelings can I trust? How does one build a way of life on a foundation of tenuous, passing or even passionate feelings? How much does one value happiness? Pleasure? Self-interest? Feelings for others? Simple perversity and spite? Must my values change every time my feelings change? Can I trust my passions? And how can decisions for the future depend upon the undependability of passing whims, a bad night's sleep, too much coffee, or a hassle on the subway? To be consistent, in such a scheme, one must be impotent. Still, all of this supposes that there are feelings, that they are given—with directions and instructions—like concrete and intuited moral principles of the moment. But a feeling does not have an identity or a direction before it is already made self-conscious. For one who is not yet self-conscious, a feeling can be a cause of behavior. In one who is self-conscious, a feeling is but an obscure text which requires an interpretation, and that presupposes a set of values. In one and the same situation I might be ashamed or embarrassed, depending on my own sense of responsibility, angry or afraid, depending on my sense of self-worth, indignant or amused, depending on my sense of morality. One can always find values given, in her everyday tasks, by "the public," but the existential self-consciousness has already closed this escape behind itself. One can no longer turn to religion, for Kant had already destroyed its authority and reduced it to a mere "postulate" of morality. So, one *creates* a criterion, "leaps" to a set of values, resigns oneself to a life. Camus calls this "philosophical suicide," for every such attempt to adopt a value is at the same

time a pretense that the value is justified. However, no one can simply rest in the existential attitude of the absurd, any more than she can relax in Hegel's dialectic. Kierkegaard's "leap," like the lie in Kafka's *Trial*, becomes for existentialism a foundational principle.

10. The existential attitude, as we have been describing it, is not merely a piece of psychology, much less psychopathology. Existential statements are at once both personal and general. Personal, however, is not autobiographical. The same Kierkegaard who complains of the lack of passion in his age is thus described by a friend: "There is nothing spontaneous about him: I am surprised he can eat and sleep." The Nietzsche one might have met in Sils Maria in 1886 was surely not the Dionysian epic hero one pictures from his writings. This is not hypocrisy. It is the mark of these great philosophers that their personal discomfort could be so brilliantly transformed into matters of universal concern and inspiration. Kierkegaard describes himself as a "stormy petrel" (a bird that appears "when, in a generation, storms begin to gather") and as "an epigram to make people aware." Nietzsche often feared that he would be considered either a saint or a buffoon. (Hesse remarked that "a nature such as Nietzsche's had to suffer the ills of our society a generation in advance"; his personal suffering was at the same time "the sickness of the times themselves.") And Camus gives us, not just *his* feelings of alienation, but "an absurd sensitivity that is widespread in our age." If these feelings are not universal, neither are they exceptional. What is exceptional is their expression in these authors and their ability to provoke others who hold these still unformed and unexpressed existential attitudes as mere personal failures and not yet as philosophical insights. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche wrote only for "the few": Camus and Sartre write to generations. Nevertheless, in each case the philosopher is not simply striving after the truth but after converts as well. The philosopher becomes the seducer, the *provocateur*. The Socratic gadfly kept people annoyedly aware of reason. The existentialist Don Juan draws his power from other people's desires, from their loneliness, from feelings of inadequacy that we all share.

11. One might object that this sketch of the existential attitude and its philosophical expression has failed to give a definition of existentialism. But existentialism is not a dead doctrine to be bottled and labeled. It is a living attitude that is yet defining and creating itself. As Nietzsche warns us in his *Genealogy of Morals*, "Only that which has no history can be defined." And Sartre, rejecting an invitation to define existentialism, says, "It is in the nature of an intellectual quest to be undefined. To name it and

define it is to wrap it up and tie the knot. What is left? A finished, already outdated mode of culture, something like a brand of soap, in other words, an idea" (*Search for a Method*). Although one might develop a working definition of one aspect of one twentieth-century existentialist "movement," namely that series of attempts to develop an existential phenomenology in extension of and reaction to Edmund Husserl's "transcendental phenomenology," existentialism is but a growing series of expressions of a set of attitudes which can be recognized only in a series of portraits. Therefore, I have made no attempts to define existentialism as such, and the selection of authors and works in this book can be justified only by their tenuous appeal to my own sympathies and perspectives on the origins, directions, and extensions of the existential attitude. Existentialism is not a movement or a set of ideas or an established list of authors. It is an attitude which has found and is still finding philosophical expression in the most gifted writers of our times. But little more needs to be said *about* existentialism, for nothing could be further from the existential attitude than attempts to define existentialism, except perhaps a discussion *about* the attempts to define existentialism.

12. In conformity with my belief that philosophical statements are a form of conceptual sculpture, I have tried to arrange the following selections as in a gallery, with each author's works prefaced by a brief introduction to give the reader some orientation. Biographical material has been kept to bare essentials, namely, dates and native country (and, where different, country of residence).