

## Existentialism and Death

Existentialism is not a doctrine but a label widely used to lump together the works of several philosophers and writers who are more or less opposed to doctrines but consider a few extreme experiences the best starting point for philosophic thinking. Spearheading the movement, Kierkegaard derided Hegel's system and wrote the books *Fear and Trembling* (1843), *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844), and *The Sickness unto Death*, which is despair (1849). Three-quarters of a century later, Jaspers devoted a central section of his *Psychology of Weltanschauungen* (1919) to extreme situations (*Grenzsituationen*), among which he included guilt and death. But if existentialism is widely associated not merely with extreme experiences in general but above all with death, this is due primarily to Heidegger who discussed death in a crucial 32-page chapter of his influential *Being and Time* (1927). Later, Sartre included a section on death in his *Being and Nothingness* (1943) and criticized Heidegger; and Camus devoted his two would-be philosophic books to suicide (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, 1942) and murder (*The Rebel*, 1951).

It was Heidegger who moved death into the center of discussion. But owing in part to the eccentricity of his approach, the discussion influenced by him has revolved rather more around his terminology than around the

phenomena which are frequently referred to but rarely illuminated. A discussion of existentialism and death should therefore begin with Heidegger, and by first giving some attention to his *approach* it may throw critical light on much of existentialism.

## 1

Heidegger's major work, *Being and Time* [6], begins with a 40-page Introduction that ends with "The Outline of the Treatise." We are told that the projected work has two parts, each of which consists of three long sections. The published work, subtitled "First Half," contains only the first two sections of Part One. The "Second Half" has never appeared.

Of the two sections published, the first bears the title, "The preparatory fundamental analysis of Being-there." "Being-there" (*Dasein*) is Heidegger's term for human existence, as opposed to that of things and animals. Heidegger's central concern is with "the meaning of Being"; but he finds that this concern itself is "a mode of the Being of some beings" (page 7), namely human beings, and he tries to show in his Introduction that "the meaning of Being" must be explored by way of an analysis of "Being-there." This, he argues, is the only way to break the deadlock in the discussion of Being begun by the Greek philosophers—a deadlock due to the fact that philosophers, at least since Aristotle, have always discussed beings rather than Being.<sup>1</sup> To gain an approach to Being, we must study not things but a mode of Being; and the mode of Being most open to us is our own Being: Being-there. Of this Heidegger proposes to offer a *phenomenological* analysis, and he expressly states his indebtedness to Husserl, the founder of the

<sup>1</sup> My suggestion that the distinction between *das Sein* and *das Seiende* be rendered in English by using Being for the former and beings for the latter has Heidegger's enthusiastic approval. His distinction was suggested to him by the Greek philosophers, and he actually found the English "beings" superior to the German *Seiendes* because the English recaptures the Greek plural, *ta onta*. (Cf. my *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, p. 206.)

phenomenological school (especially on page 38). Indeed, *Being and Time* first appeared in Husserl's *Jahrbuch für Philosophie und phänomenologische Forschung*.

It is entirely typical of Heidegger's essentially unphenomenological procedure that he explains "The phenomenological method of inquiry" (paragraph 7) by devoting one subsection to "the concept of the phenomenon" and another to "the concept of the *logos*," each time offering dubious discussions of the etymologies of the Greek words, before he finally comes to the conclusion that the meaning of phenomenology can be formulated: "to allow to see from itself that which shows itself, as it shows itself from itself. (*Das was sich zeigt, so wie es sich von ihm selbst her zeigt, von ihm selbst her sehen lassen*)." And he himself adds: "But this is not saying anything different at all from the maxim cited above: 'To the things themselves!'" This had been Husserl's maxim. Heidegger takes seven pages of dubious arguments, questionable etymologies, and extremely arbitrary and obscure coinages and formulations to say in a bizarre way what not only could be said, but what others before him actually had said, in four words.

In *Being and Time* coinages are the crux of his technique. He calls ". . . the characteristics of Being-there *existentials* (*Existenzialien*). They must be distinguished sharply from the determinations of the Being of those beings whose Being is not Being-there, the latter being categories" (page 44). "Existentials and categories are the two basic possibilities of characteristics of Being. The beings that correspond to them demand different modes of asking primary questions: beings are either *Who* (existence) or *Which* (Being-at-hand in the widest sense)" (page 45).

It has not been generally noted, if it has been noted at all, that without these quaint locutions the book would not only be much less obscure, and therefore much less fitted for endless discussions in European and South American graduate seminars, but also a fraction of its length—considerably under 100 pages instead of 438. For Heidegger does not introduce coinages to say briefly

what would otherwise require lengthy repetitions. On the contrary.

While Kierkegaard had derided professorial manners and concentrated on the most extreme experiences, and Nietzsche wrote of guilt, conscience, and death as if he did not even know of academic airs, Heidegger housebreaks Kierkegaard's and Nietzsche's problems by discussing them in such a style that Hegel and Aquinas seem unacademic by comparison. The following footnote is entirely characteristic: "The auth. may remark that he has repeatedly communicated the analysis of the about-world (*Umwelt*) and, altogether, the 'hermeneutics of the facticity' of Being-there, in his lectures since the wint. semest. 1919/20" (page 72). Husserl is always cited as "E. Husserl" and Kant as "I. Kant"—and his own minions dutifully cite the master as "M. Heidegger."

How Kierkegaard would have loved to comment on Heidegger's occasional "The detailed reasons for the following consideration will be given only in . . . Part II, Section 2"—which never saw the light of day (page 89)! Eleven pages later we read: ". . . only now the here accomplished critique of the Cartesian, and fundamentally still presently accepted, world-ontology can be assured of its philosophic rights. To that end the following must be shown (cf. Part I, Sect. 3)." Alas, this, too, was never published; but after reading the four questions that follow one does not feel any keen regret. Witness the second: "Why is it that in-worldly beings take the place of the leaped-over phenomenon by leaping into the picture as the ontological topic?" (That is, why have beings been discussed instead of Being?) Though Heidegger is hardly a poet, his terminology recalls one of Nietzsche's aphorisms [14]: "The poet presents his thoughts festively, on the carriage of rhythm: usually because they could not walk" (page 54).

If all the sentences quoted so far are readily translatable into less baroque language, the following italicized explanation of understanding (page 144) may serve as an example of the many, more opaque pronouncements. (No other well-known philosophic work contains nearly so many italics—or rather their German

equivalent which takes up twice as much space as ordinary type.) "Understanding is the existential Being of the own Being-able-to-be of Being-there itself, but such that this Being in itself opens up the Where-at of Being with itself. (*Verstehen ist das existenziale Sein des eigenen Seinkönnens des Daseins selbst, so zwar, dass dieses Sein an ihm selbst das Woran des mit ihm selbst Seins erschliesst.*)" The sentence following this one reads in full: "The structure of this existential must now be grasped and expressed still more sharply." Still more?

Heidegger's discussion of death comes near the beginning of the second of the two sections he published. To understand it, two key concepts of the first section should be mentioned briefly: The first is *Das Man*, one of Heidegger's happier coinages. The German word *man* is the equivalent of the English *one* in such locutions as "one does not do that" or "of course, one must die." However the German *man* does not have any of the other meanings of the English word *one*. It is therefore understandable why *Das Man* has been translated sometimes as "the public" or "the anonymous They," but since Heidegger also makes much of the phrase *Man selbst*, which means "oneself," it is preferable to translate *Das Man* as "the One." The One is the despot that rules over the inauthentic Being-there of our everyday lives.

The other notion in the first section of *Being and Time* which requires mention is the concept of *Angst* to which Kierkegaard had already devoted a major work. It is sharply distinguished from fear, which is said to be focused on objects. Kierkegaard's book has been translated as *The Concept of Dread* [12], but probably the only way to crystallize the crucial contrast in English is to use "anxiety." In anxiety we are said not to be afraid of any thing or object. "*The of-what of anxiety is Being-in-the-world as such.*" "The of-what of anxiety is no in-worldly being." "That that which is threatening is *nowhere*, is characteristic of the of-what of anxiety." "In the of-what of anxiety the 'it is nothing and nowhere' stands revealed" (page 186). And on the next page Heideg-

ger repeats, again in italics: "*The of-what of which anxiety feels anxiety is Being-in-the-world itself.*"

This is surely dubious. It is true that human beings occasionally experience anxiety without being able to say of what they are afraid, but Heidegger has not shown at all that either in many or in any of these cases people are afraid of "Being-in-the-world"—either "*itself*" or "*as such.*" Nor has he shown or given reasons to believe that investigation might not show a man who feels anxiety without knowing of what he is afraid that he was in fact afraid of this or that. The fact that some of us sometimes feel a desperate sense of loneliness and abandonment does not settle such questions.

There might be different types of anxiety, and one might find that a sense of guilt and intimations of possibilities that we associate with guilt play a crucial role in some types. This was suggested by Kierkegaard, whom Heidegger merely paraphrases when he says: "Anxiety reveals in Being-there the *Being* for ownmost Being-able-to-be, i.e., the *Being-free* for the freedom to choose and grasp our selves. Anxiety confronts Being-there with its *Being-free* for—(*propensio in*)—the ownmost authenticity of its Being as a possibility, which it always is already. . . . Anxiety makes single and thus opens up Being-there as '*solus ipse.*'" (page 188).

"Fear is," according to Heidegger, "inauthentic anxiety which conceals anxiety from itself" (page 189). "The physiological triggering of anxiety becomes possible only because Being-there feels anxiety in the ground of its Being" (page 190). A footnote on the same page begins with the false assertion that "The phenomena of anxiety and fear . . . have, without exception, never been differentiated" and then ends with the startling understatement: "In the analysis of the phenomena of anxiety S. Kierkegaard has penetrated relatively farthest. . . ."

In fact, Kierkegaard, for better or for worse, anticipated Heidegger's distinction and linked anxiety with the concept of

“nothing” [12, page 38]: “What effect does Nothing produce? It begets anxiety. . . . One almost never sees the concept of anxiety dealt with in psychology, and I must therefore call attention to the fact that it is different from fear and similar concepts which refer to something definite, whereas anxiety is the reality of freedom as possibility anterior to possibility.” On page 39 Kierkegaard reveals that the linking of anxiety with Nothing was suggested to him at least in part by a Danish idiom. Later (page 53) he mentions that Schelling “often talks about anxiety,” and then (page 55) he offers us the epigram: “Anxiety is the dizziness of freedom.”

A distinction between fear and anxiety was also made by Freud [5] in his lecture on “Anxiety” in *General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* (1917): “Anxiety refers to the state and ignores the object, while fear directs attention precisely to the object.” Freud’s distinction, unlike Heidegger’s, leaves open the question whether in the case of anxiety, too, there may not be an object after all, even though not, as it were, in focus. The object, of course, need not be a *thing* any more than in fear. It could be an event, for example, or a situation.

Heidegger’s discussion of anxiety ends with the claim that anxiety, by making man feel single or, as we might say, completely alone, tears him out of the everyday world, dominated by the anonymous One, “and reveals to him authenticity and inauthenticity as possibilities of his Being. These basic possibilities of Being-there, which is always mine, show themselves in anxiety as in themselves, without being obstructed by any in-worldly beings to which Being-there at first and for the most part clings” (page 191).

## 2

The second of the six chapters that constitute the second and last section of *Being and Time* bears the title: “The possible Being-whole of Being-there and Being-toward-death (*Das mögliche Ganzsein des Daseins und das Sein zum Tode*).” On page 235

where it begins we find a footnote referring to the preceding, introductory discussion in which we are told about Kierkegaard that “from his ‘edifying’ discourses one can learn more philosophically than from his theoretical works—excepting his treatise on the concept of anxiety.”

At great length, Heidegger argues to establish this conclusion (pages 239 and 253): “Death does reveal itself as a loss, but rather as a loss experienced by the survivors. The suffering of this loss, however, does not furnish an approach to the loss of Being as such which is ‘suffered’ by the person who died. We do not experience in a genuine sense the dying of the others but are at most always only ‘present.’” . . . “The public interpretation of Being-there says, ‘one dies,’ because in this way everybody else as well as oneself can be deceived into thinking: not, to be sure, just I myself; for this One is *Nobody*. . . . In this way the One brings about a *continual putting at ease about death*.” A footnote on page 254 adds: “L. N. Tolstoi, in his story, *The Death of Ivan Ilyitch*, has presented the phenomenon of the shattering and the collapse of this ‘one dies.’”

No doubt, Tolstoi’s story was one of the central inspirations of Heidegger’s discussion. *The Death of Ivan Ilyitch* [16] is a superb book—with an emphatic moral. It is a sustained attack on society in the form of a story about a member of society whose life is utterly empty, futile, and pointless—but no more so than the lives of all the other members of society who surround him, notably his colleagues and his wife. They all live to no point and tell themselves and each other “one dies” without ever seriously confronting the certainty that they themselves must die. The only appealing person in the book is a poor muzhik who, realizing that he, too, will have to die one day, patiently and lovingly does all he can to help Ivan. In the final pages of the book Ivan becomes aware of the futility of his own life and overcomes it, realizing that his malady is not merely a matter of a diseased kidney or appendix but of leaving behind a pointless life to die. He ceases

pretending, and "From that moment began that shriek that did not cease for three days"; but during these three days he learns to care for others, feels sorry for his wife, and, for the first time, loves. Now, "In place of death was light! . . . 'What joy!' " Death had lost its terror.

Heidegger on death is for the most part an unacknowledged commentary on *The Death of Ivan Ilyitch*. "Even 'thinking of death' is publicly considered cowardly fear . . . *The One does not allow the courage for anxiety of death to rise.*" Propriety does not permit Ivan to shriek. He must always pretend that he will soon get better. It would be offensive for him to admit that he is dying. But in the end he has the courage to defy propriety and shriek. "The development of such a 'superior' indifference alienates Being-there from its ownmost, unrelated Being-able-to-be" [6, page 254]. It is only when he casts aside his self-deceiving indifference that Ivan returns to himself, to his capacity for love, and leaves behind the self-betrayal of his alienated inauthentic life. "Being-toward-death is essentially anxiety" [6, page 266]—in Tolstoi's story if not elsewhere.

It is no criticism of Tolstoi to note that not all men are like Ivan Ilyitch. I might suppose that I myself am possibly exceptional in frankly living with the vivid certainty that I must die, were it not for the fact that in a recent World War my whole generation—millions of young men—lived with this thought. Many got married, saying to themselves, "I do not have much time left, but I want to live just once, if only for one week or possibly a few months." And Heidegger's generation (he was born in 1889) had the same experience in the First World War. Tolstoi's indictment of an un-Christian, unloving, hypocritical world cannot simply be read as a fair characterization of humanity. Nor is it true that "Being-toward-death is essentially anxiety," and that all illustrations to the contrary can be explained as instances of self-deception and the lack of "courage for anxiety of death."

At this point one begins to wonder whether, under the influence

of the First World War, some other thinker did not possibly consider death a little earlier than Heidegger, without basing himself so largely on a single story. Indeed, in 1915, Freud [5] published two essays under the title, *Timely Thoughts on War and Death*. I shall quote from the first two pages of the second essay, which he called "Our Relation to Death." Heidegger did not refer to Freud and did not even list Freud's later discussions of conscience in his footnote bibliography on conscience [6, page 272]. But while Heidegger's discussion of conscience is the worse for ignoring Freud's analyses, Heidegger's pages upon pages about death are in large part long-winded repetitions of what Freud had said briefly at the beginning of his paper [5, pages 332–333]:

. . . The war has disturbed our previous relation to death. This relation was not sincere. If one listened to us, we were, of course, ready to declare that death is the necessary end of all life, that every one of us owed nature his own death and must be prepared to pay this debt—in short, that death is natural, undeniable, and unavoidable. In reality, however, we used to behave as if it were different. We have shown the unmistakable tendency to push death aside, to eliminate it from life. We have tried to keep a deadly silence about death: after all, we even have a proverb to the effect that one thinks about something as one thinks about death. One's own, of course. After all, one's own death is beyond imagining, and whenever we try to imagine it we can see that we really survive as spectators. Thus the dictum could be dared in the psychoanalytic school: At bottom, nobody believes in his own death. Or, and this is the same: In his unconscious, every one of us is convinced of his immortality. As for the death of others, a cultured man will carefully avoid speaking of this possibility if the person fated to die can hear him. Only children ignore this rule. . . . We regularly emphasize the accidental cause of death, the mishap, the disease, the infection, the advanced age, and thus betray our eagerness to demote death from a necessity to a mere accident. Toward the deceased himself we behave in a special way, almost as if we were full of admiration for someone who has accomplished something very difficult. We suspend criticism of him, forgive him any injustice, pronounce the motto, *de mortuis nil nisi bene*, and consider it justified that in the funeral sermon and on the gravestone the most advantageous things are said

about him. Consideration for the dead, who no longer need it, we place higher than truth—and, most of us, certainly also higher than consideration for the living.<sup>2</sup>

The simple, unpretentious clarity of these remarks, their un-oracular humanity and humor, and their straight appeal to experience could hardly furnish a more striking contrast to Heidegger's verbiage. It is said sometimes that Heidegger more than anyone else has provoked discussion of phenomena which, in spite of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, were ignored by the professors and their students. But, in the wake of Heidegger, discussion concentrated not on these phenomena but on his terms and weird locutions. Death, anxiety, conscience, and care became part of the jargon tossed about by thousands, along with Being-there, to-hand-ness, thrown-ness, Being-with, and all the rest. But he did not present definite claims for discussion, not to speak of hypotheses.

His remarks about death culminate in the italicized assertion [6, page 266]: "The running-ahead reveals to Being-there the lostness into Oneself and brings it before the possibility . . . of Being itself—*itself*, however, in the passionate *freedom for death* which has rid itself of the illusions of the One, become factual, certain of itself, and full of anxiety." (The words italicized here are printed in boldface type in the original.) Unquestionably, the acceptance of the fact that I must die (my running-ahead to my death in thought) may forcibly remind me of the limited amount of time at my disposal, of the waste involved in spending it in awe of the anonymous One, and thus become a powerful incentive to make the most of my own Being here and now. But Heidegger's habits of gluing his thoughts to words, or of squeezing thoughts out of words, or of piling up such weird locutions that, as he himself insists, not one of his disciples of the days when he wrote, taught, and talked *Being and Time* seems to have got the point, have not encouraged questions like this one: Is it necessary that the resolute

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<sup>2</sup> Author's translation.

acceptance of my own death must still be accompanied by a feeling of anxiety, as Heidegger insists?

At this point Heidegger relies too heavily on the Christian writers who have influenced him most: above all, in this case, Kierkegaard and Tolstoi, and perhaps also Jacob Böhme (*Of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ*, part II, chapter 4, section 1, and *Six Theosophic Points*, part I) and Schelling, who claimed in *Die Weltalter* that anxiety is "the basic feeling of every living creature." In Heidegger, Schelling's *Grundempfindung* becomes *Grundbefindlichkeit*.

Consider the letter which President Vargas of Brazil wrote to his people before committing suicide. It ends:

. . . I fought against the looting of Brazil. I fought against the looting of the people. I have fought barebreasted. The hatred, infamy, and calumny did not beat down my spirit. I gave you my life. Now I offer my death. Nothing remains. Serenely I take the first step on the road to eternity and I leave life to enter history.<sup>3</sup>

Or consider this letter, included in *The Divine Wind* [8], which Isao Matsuo, a Japanese flier trained for a suicide mission, wrote to his parents:

. . . Please congratulate me. I have been given a splendid opportunity to die . . . I shall fall like a blossom from a radiant cherry tree . . . How I appreciate this chance to die like a man! . . . Thank you, my parents, for the 23 years during which you have cared for me and inspired me. I hope that my present deed will in some small way repay what you have done for me.

Or consider David Hume's complete lack of anxiety which so annoyed his Christian "friends" who hoped for a deathbed conversion. Or Socrates' calm in the face of death. Or the Stoic sages who, admiring Socrates, committed tranquil suicide when in their nineties. Or the ancient Romans.

Heidegger's talk about anxiety should be read as a document of the German 1920s, when it suddenly became fashionable to

<sup>3</sup> *New York Herald Tribune*, August 25, 1955.

admit one was afraid. In Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) it was obvious that this new honesty was aimed against militarism and of a piece with Arnold Zweig's noting that when ". . . Sergeant Grischa" at the end of Zweig's great novel (1928) is shot, "his bowels discharged excrement." But while it took some courage to disregard propriety and to admit that some men, when confronting death, are scared and that some, when shot, will fill their pants, it remained for Heidegger to blow up observations of this sort into general truths about Being.

He was not quickly refuted with a list of fatal counterinstances because he put things into such outrageous language that reactions to his prose have in the main been of one of four types:

1. One did not read him at all and ignored him, as the majority of mankind did.

2. One read him a little, found him extremely difficult, and took it for granted that the fault was one's own and that, of course, there must be more to his assertions than they seemed to say—especially since he himself says frequently that they are not anthropological but ontological—truths not about man but about Being.

3. One read him, found him difficult, persevered, spent years studying him, and—what else could one do after years of study of that sort?—one became a teacher of philosophy, protecting one's investment by "explaining" Heidegger to students, warding off objections by some such remark as: "There is much that I, too, don't understand as yet, but I shall give my life to trying to understand a little more."

4. This type, now gaining ground among American intellectuals, has not read Heidegger at all but has heard about him and his influence and therefore assumes that there must be a great deal to him.

If there are a few who know his work and don't respect it, this is because most critical readers soon discover that it is not worth their while to go on reading.

## 3

Sartre has offered one crucial criticism of Heidegger in his own discussion of death in *Being and Nothingness* [15]. Heidegger argues that only the running-ahead to my own death can lead me to my ownmost, authentic Being because “*Dying is something which nobody can do for another. . . . Dying shows that death is constituted ontologically by always-mineness and existence.*” And more in the same vein [6, page 240]. As Sartre points out rightly, this in no way distinguishes dying [15, pages 533 and following]. Nobody can love for me or sleep for me or breathe for me. Every experience, taken as *my* experience, is “something which nobody can do for” me. I can live a lot of my life in the mode of inauthenticity in which it makes no decisive difference that it is I who am doing this or that; but in that mode it makes no difference either whether the bullet hits me or someone else, whether I die first or another. But if I adopt the attitude that it does matter, that it makes all the difference in the world to me, then I can adopt that attitude toward the experience of my loving this particular woman, toward my writing this particular book, toward my seeing, hearing, feeling, or bearing witness, no less than I can adopt it toward death. As Sartre says [15, page 535]: “In short there is no personalizing virtue which is peculiar to *my* death. Quite the contrary, it becomes *my* death only if I place myself already in the perspective of subjectivity.”

Sartre goes on to criticize Heidegger’s whole conception of “Being-toward-death.” Although we may anticipate that we ourselves must die, we never know when we shall die; but it is the timing of one’s death that makes all the difference when it comes to the meaning of one’s life.

. . . We have, in fact, every chance of dying before we have accomplished our task, or, on the other hand, of outliving it. There is therefore a very slim chance that our death will be presented to us as that

of Sophocles was, for example, in the manner of a resolved chord. And if it is only *chance* which decides the character of our death and therefore of our life, then even the death which most resembles the end of a melody cannot be waited for as such; luck by determining it for me removes from it any character as a harmonious end. . . . A death like that of Sophocles will therefore *resemble* a resolved chord but will not *be* one, just as the group of letters formed by the falling of alphabet blocks will perhaps resemble a word but will not be one. Thus this perpetual appearance of chance at the heart of my projects cannot be apprehended as *my* possibility but, on the contrary, as the nihilation of all my possibilities, a nihilation which *itself is no longer a part of my possibilities*. [15, page 537]

. . . Suppose that Balzac had died before *Les Chouans*; he would remain the author of some execrable novels of intrigue. But suddenly the very expectation which this young man was, this expectation of being a great man, loses any kind of meaning; it is neither an obstinate and egotistical blindness nor the true sense of his own value since nothing shall ever decide it. . . . The final value of this conduct remains forever in suspense; or if you prefer, the ensemble (particular kinds of conduct, expectations, values) falls suddenly into the absurd. Thus death is never that which gives life its meanings; it is, on the contrary, that which on principle removes all meaning from life. [15, page 539]

. . . The unique characteristic of a dead life is that it is a life of which the Other makes himself the guardian. [15, page 541]

Suicide is no way out, says Sartre. Its meaning depends on the future. "If I 'misfire,' shall I not judge later that my suicide was cowardice? Will the outcome not show me that other solutions were possible? . . . Suicide is an absurdity which causes my life to be submerged in the absurd" [15, page 540].

Finally, Sartre asks: "In renouncing Heidegger's Being-toward-death, have we abandoned forever the possibility of freely giving to our being a meaning for which we are responsible? Quite the contrary." Sartre repudiates Heidegger's "strict identification of death and finitude" and says:

. . . Human reality would remain finite even if it were immortal, because it *makes* itself finite by choosing itself as human. To be finite,

in fact, is to choose oneself—that is, to make known to oneself what one is by projecting oneself toward one possibility to the exclusion of others. The very act of freedom is therefore the assumption and creation of finitude. If I make myself, I make myself finite and hence my life is unique. [15, page 545]

Sartre has also dealt with human attitudes toward death in some of his plays and in his story *The Wall*, which is reprinted and discussed in my *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* [9]. But in the present chapter we cannot analyze his often admirable plays and stories. And before proceeding to an evaluation of the above ideas, let us first consider Camus.

## 4

Although Camus' politics were more acceptable to the Nobel Prize committee and are admittedly more attractive than those of Sartre, and although perhaps no other writer has ever equaled Camus' charming pose of decency and honesty and a determination to be lucid, Henri Peyre is surely right when, in a review of Camus' books and of several books about him, he charges *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel* with being "not only contradictory, but confused and probably shallow and immature."<sup>4</sup>

With the utmost portentousness, Camus begins the first of his two philosophic works, *The Myth of Sisyphus* [3, page 21]: "There is but one truly serious philosophic problem, and that is suicide." Soon we are told that the world is "absurd." A little later: "I said that the world is absurd, but I was too hasty. This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much on man as on the world." This point could be put more

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<sup>4</sup> H. Peyre, "Comment on Camus," *Virginia Quart. Rev.*, 34 (4): 623-629, Autumn 1958. What Peyre says is, to be precise, that Philip Thody, in *Albert Camus*, "is forced to confess when he comes to those two volumes that they are not only . . ."

idiomatically and accurately by saying that the hunger to gain clarity about and to explain all things is really absurd or, to be more precise, quixotic. But Camus prefers to rhapsodize about absurdity, although he says [3, page 40]: "I want to know whether I can live with what I know and with that alone." He speaks of "this absurd logic" (page 31), evidently meaning the special logic of talk about the absurd, as if such talk had any special logic. Then he speaks of the "absurd mind," meaning a believer in the absurdity of the world—or rather of the absurdity, or quixotism, of man's endeavors—as when he says [3, page 35]: "To Chestov reason is useless but there is something beyond reason. To an absurd mind [i.e., Camus] reason is useless and there is nothing beyond reason." The word "useless," too, is used without precision; what is meant is something like "limited" or "not omnipotent." A little later still [3, page 40]: "The absurd . . . does not lead to God. Perhaps this notion will become clearer if I risk this shocking statement: the absurd is sin without God." Without being shocked, one may note the looseness of the style and thinking: no attempt is made to explain what is meant by "sin," and Camus is evidently satisfied that his vague statement, even if it does not succeed in shocking us, is at least evocative. But from a writer who quotes Nietzsche as often as Camus does in this book—and in *The Rebel*, too—one might expect that he would at least raise the question whether, by not including God in our picture of the world, we don't restore to being its "innocence," as Nietzsche claimed, and leave sin behind.

As far as Kierkegaard, Jaspers, and Chestov are concerned, Camus is surely right that "The theme of the irrational, as it is conceived by the existentials [sic], is reason becoming confused and escaping by negating itself." But when he adds, "The absurd is lucid reason noting its limits," it becomes apparent that all the oracular discussions of absurdity are quite dispensable and that Camus has not added clarification but only confusion to Freud's two-sentence critique of the suggestion that the essence of re-

ligion consists in a feeling of absolute dependence: "It is not this feeling that constitutes the essence of religiousness, but only the next step, the reaction to it, which seeks a remedy against this feeling. He who goes no further, he who humbly resigns himself to the insignificant part man plays in the universe, is, on the contrary, irreligious in the truest sense of the word." (*The Future of an Illusion* [5], section 6—written in 1927, fifteen years before *The Myth of Sisyphus*.) The same thought permeates the books of Nietzsche.

Nietzsche, however, had gone on to celebrate "Free Death," especially in the penultimate chapter of Part One of *Zarathustra* [14] and in *The Twilight of the Idols* [14, pages 183 to 186 and 536 to 537]: ". . . usually it is death under the most contemptible conditions, an unfree death, death *not* at the right time, a coward's death. From love of *life*, one should desire a different death: free, conscious, without accident, without ambush." Nietzsche's thought is clear, though he collapsed, but did not die, in his boots, as it were—and his relatives then dragged out his life for another eleven years.

Camus' argument against suicide remains sketchy and unclear [3, pages 54 and following]: "Suicide, like the leap, is acceptance at its extreme. Everything is over and man returns to his essential history. . . . In its way, suicide settles the absurd. It engulfs the absurd in the same death. . . . It is essential to die unreconciled and not of one's own free will. Suicide is a repudiation." Camus wants "defiance." He is really preaching, no less than in his later work, *The Rebel* [4], in which "the rebel" replaces the editorial "we," and exhortations are presented in the form of literally false generalizations. "The rebel does *x*" means "I do *x* and wish you would." In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus hides similarly behind "an absurd mind" and "an absurd logic."

Now suicide is "acceptance," now it is "repudiation." Surely, sometimes it is one and sometimes the other, and occasionally both—acceptance of defeat and repudiation of hope. Nietzsche's

“free death” was meant as an affirmation of sorts, an acceptance of one’s own life and of all the world with it, a festive realization of fulfillment, coupled with the thought that this life, as lived up to this point and now consummated, was so acceptable that it did not stand in need of any further deeds or days but could be gladly relived over and over in the course of an eternal recurrence of the same events at gigantic intervals.

The first part of Camus’ *Myth of Sisyphus* is ambiguously and appropriately entitled “An Absurd Reasoning.” Portentiousness thickens toward the end: “The absurd enlightens me on this point: there is no future,” [3, page 58]. “Knowing whether or not one can live *without appeal* is all that interests me” (page 60). “Now, the conditions of modern life impose on the majority of men the same quantity of experiences and consequently the same profound experiences. To be sure, there must also be taken into consideration the individual’s spontaneous contribution, the ‘given’ element in him. But I cannot judge of that, and let me repeat that my rule here is to get along with the immediate evidence” (page 61). In sum: men don’t, of course, have the same quantity of experiences, and least of all the same profound experiences, but in the name of simple honesty we must pretend they do.

This paraphrase may seem excessively unsympathetic; but consider what Camus himself says on the next page:

. . . Here we have to be over-simple. To two men living the same number of years, the world always provides the same sum of experiences. It is up to us to be conscious of them. Being aware of one’s life, one’s revolt, one’s freedom, and to the maximum, is living, and to the maximum [sic]. Where lucidity dominates, the scale of values becomes useless. Let’s be even more simple. [3, page 62]

Why in heaven’s name must we be so “over-simple” and then “even more simple”? Two men who live the same number of years do *not* always have the same number of experiences, with the sole difference that one is more aware of them, while the other is partly blind. Life is not like a film that rolls by while we either watch or

sleep. Some suffer sicknesses, have visions, love, despair, work, and experience failures and successes; others toil in the unbroken twilight of mute misery, their minds uneducated, chained to deadening routine. Also, Camus overlooks that a man can to some extent involve himself in experiences, that he can seek security or elect to live dangerously, to use Nietzsche's phrase. And finally Camus writes as if experiences were like drops that fall into the bucket of the mind at a steady rate—say, one per second—and as if the sequence made no difference at all; as if seeing *Lear* at the age of one, ten, or thirty were the same.

Let us resume our quotation where we broke off:

. . . Let us say that the sole obstacle, the sole deficiency to be made good, is constituted by premature death. Thus it is that no depth, no emotion, no passion, and no sacrifice could render equal in the eyes of the absurd man (even if he wished it so) a conscious life of forty years and a lucidity spread over sixty years. Madness and death are his irreparables. . . . There will never be any substitute for twenty years of life and experience. . . . The present and the succession of presents before a constantly conscious soul is the ideal of the absurd man. [3, pages 63–64]

Camus is welcome to his absurd man, who is indeed absurd, wishing to imbibe, collect, and hoard experiences, any experiences, as long as they add up to some huge quantity—the more the better. If only he did not deceive himself so utterly about the quality of his own thinking—as when he concludes the second essay of the book by counting himself among those “who think clearly and have ceased to hope.” For all that, Camus' *The Stranger* is admirable, and *The Fall*, too, is superior to *The Rebel* and the arguments discussed here. Camus is a fine writer, but not a philosopher.

## 5

Camus' confusions bring to mind a poem by Hölderlin [7]: “*Nur einen Sommer . . .*” Heidegger has devoted essay after essay to this poet and eventually collected the lot in a book, but

has not written about this poem, which is both clearer and better than the ones Heidegger likes—to read his own thoughts into.

A single summer grant me, great powers, and  
 A single autumn for fully ripened song  
 That, sated with the sweetness of my  
 Playing, my heart may more willingly die.  
 The soul that, living, did not attain its divine  
 Right cannot repose in the nether world.  
 But once what I am bent on, what is  
 Holy, my poetry, is accomplished,  
 Be welcome then, stillness of the shadows' world!  
 I shall be satisfied though my lyre will not  
 Accompany me down there. Once I  
 Lived like the gods, and more is not needed.<sup>5</sup>

Of the “absurd man” Camus says, as we have seen: “Madness and death are his irreparables.” Hölderlin did become mad soon after writing this poem, but the point of the poem is that still he should not have preferred to be Camus, not to speak of lesser men. There is not only a “substitute” for twenty years of life but something more desirable by far: “Once I lived like the gods, and more is not needed.”

This is overlooked by Sartre, too. Rightly, he recognizes that death can cut off a man before he has had a chance to give his life a meaning, that death may be—but he falsely thinks it always is—“the nihilation of all my possibilities.” Not only in childhood but long after that one may retain the feeling that one is in this sense still at the mercy of death. “But once what I am bent on, what is Holy, my poetry, is accomplished,” once I have succeeded in achieving—in the face of death, in a race with death—a project that is truly mine and not something that anybody else might have done as well, if not better, then the picture changes: I have won the race and in a sense have triumphed over death. Death and madness come too late.

We see the poet's later madness in the light of his own poem;

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<sup>5</sup> Author's translation.

nor does it greatly matter that Nietzsche, like Hölderlin, vegetated for a few years before death took him: his work was done. To be sure, others make themselves the guardians of the dead life and interpret it according to their lights; but we have no defense if they begin to do the same while we are still alive. Nor can we say that this is the price of finitude, of finite works no less than finite lives. Men say that God is infinite but can hardly deny that theologians and believers make themselves the guardians of the infinite and offer their interpretations, if not behind His back then in His face.

And Heidegger? Does he not say little indeed? He reminds us of the commonplace—much better, more succinctly and humanely, put to us by Freud and, still earlier at greater length, but much more vividly, by Tolstoi—that most men would rather not face up to the certainty that they themselves must die. Before the end of World War I it may even have taken courage to be openly afraid of death—or of anything else, for that matter; but since the 1920s it has been fashionable to admit to *Angst*. That the man who accepts his death may find in this experience a strong spur to making something of his life and may succeed in some accomplishment that robs him of the fear of death and permits him to say “welcome then” was better said by Hölderlin in sixteen lines than by Heidegger in sixteen books.

Kierkegaard and Nietzsche challenged their age and were, to use two Nietzschean phrases “untimely” and “born posthumously.” Heidegger’s reputation, on the contrary, depends on his great timeliness: long before most other philosophers of his generation he took up the concerns of his age. In view of the exceeding difficulty of his prose, the reader who penetrates to the point of recognizing that the author is alluding to a genuine experience—say, the recognition of one’s utter loneliness in this world—feels that there is more to Heidegger than those who shrug him off as “all nonsense” admit. But the question remains whether Heidegger has illuminated the phenomena of which he speaks and which others

had described better before he did. The answer is that he is invariably less enlightening than the best among his predecessors.

To give a final example, both Georg Büchner (1813–1837), the author of the two plays, *Danton's Death* [1] and *Woyzeck* [2], and Heinrich von Kleist (1777–1811), whose *Prince Friedrich von Homburg* [13] is one of the most popular German plays, not only anticipated Heidegger but far surpassed him in insight. Kleist, who had been a Prussian officer over a hundred years before World War I, had the courage to describe and bring to life upon the stage the prince's dread of death—the prince being a general sentenced to death—but then went on to depict in the same drama the prince's conquest of anxiety, to the point where in the final scene he is ready to be shot without the slightest remnant of anxiety. He is blindfolded but—one thinks of Dostoevsky and of the end of Sartre's story *The Wall*—pardoned.

Those who want a better understanding of human attitudes toward death may learn more from Hölderlin, Kleist, and Büchner, and from Sartre's and Camus' fiction and plays than from existentialist exercises in philosophy. Indeed, the awesome terminology of Heidegger and others who have followed in his wake has distracted attention from many important distinctions. I shall mention four:

First, the world's major religions have encouraged different attitudes toward death. Although some early Christian martyrs died fearlessly, in eager anticipation of eternal bliss, Christianity has on the whole used its vast influence to make men dread death. The Buddha's attitude was very different: after his enlightenment experience he transcended all anxiety, and the stories of his death represent an outright antithesis to the stories of Christ's dread-full death.

Second, we should ask to what extent vitality influences attitudes toward death; but existentialists have not considered differences between patients and soldiers or the influence of weariness. From this point of view, Malraux's novel *La Condition Humaine*,

translated as *Man's Fate*, is much more interesting than Heidegger. The last part is nothing less than a study of different attitudes toward death.

Third, one should ask to what extent attitudes toward death would be changed by the assurance that the world would end for all when we die—that there is absolutely nothing we shall miss.

Finally, not one of the existentialists has grasped the most crucial distinction that makes all the difference in facing death. Nietzsche stated it in *The Gay Science*, section 290 [14, pages 98 and following]: “For one thing is needful: that a human being attain his satisfaction with himself—whether it be by this or by that poetry and art; only then is a human being at all tolerable to behold. Whoever is dissatisfied with himself is always ready to revenge himself therefor; we others will be his victims, if only by always having to stand his ugly sight. For the sight of the ugly makes men bad and gloomy.” Or, as Hölderlin says: “The soul that, living, did not attain its divine Right cannot repose in the nether world.” But he that has made something of his life can face death without anxiety: “Once I Lived like the gods, and more is not needed.”

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