

Existentialism, New and Old

PHILOSOPHY IS FOR EVERYMAN. A Short Course in Philosophical Thinking. By Karl Jaspers. Translated by R. F. C. Hull and Grete Wels from the German "Kleine Schule des Philosophischen Denkens." 125 pp. A Helen and Kurt Wolff Book. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World. \$4.50.

INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW EXISTENTIALISM. By Colin Wilson. 188 pp. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company. \$4.95.

SARTRE. His Philosophy and Existential Psychoanalysis. Second Revised and Enlarged Edition. By Alfred Stern. 276 pp. New York: Delacorte Press. \$6.

By WALTER KAUFMANN

WHILE existentialism has become the most popular philosophy of the century, its three leading proponents have disowned it. Twenty years have passed since Jean-Paul Sartre's lecture "Existentialism Is a Humanism" made "existentialism" an international byword, and Martin Heidegger, widely considered the source of this philosophy, published his "Letter on Humanism" to repudiate both humanism and existentialism. Karl Jaspers, the other German philosopher who is generally considered an existentialist, has little sympathy for either Heidegger or Sartre and no wish to be lumped with them. And lately even Sartre has disparaged existentialism, while extolling Marxism as the philosophy of our age. His interpretation of Marxism of course, is highly unorthodox.

Existentialism never was a common body of doctrine. Like "Continental Rationalism," it is a convenient label for the philosophies of three individuals who define their own importance very largely in terms of their disagreements. Because Spinoza tried to correct Descartes' errors, and Leibniz differed so importantly with both, all three are best studied together. It is similar with the "British Empiricists"—Locke, Berkeley and Hume—and with Jaspers, Heidegger and Sartre.

The Big Three existentialists share some ancestors—notably, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche—and are further set apart from the mainstream of British and American philosophy by their conviction that our most extreme experiences are the best starting points for philosophy. In 1919 Jaspers called these experiences *Grenzsituationen*, ultimate or border situations: they include guilt, care, anxiety, our anticipation of our own death, and a traumatic sense of our finitude. These concerns were widespread in Germany after she lost World War I, but it was partly through Jaspers's work that they became academically respectable.

Heidegger's "Being and Time" (1927) stressed the same experiences, if only as points of departure for an inquiry concerning Being; and this aspect of his book struck the popu-

lar fancy, while even disciples who went on to become professors of philosophy took his concern with ontology much less seriously—except for Sartre, who called his major work "Being and Nothingness" (1943).

Twenty-five years ago, when Sartre was finishing that book as well as his two most successful plays ("No Exit" and "The Flies") in Nazi-occupied Paris, the two German existentialists had been reduced to silence: Jaspers because he had never become a Nazi and his wife is Jewish, Heidegger partly by his embarrassment over his own enthusiastic reception of Nazism. Since the war ended, however, the output of all three men has become immense.

Jaspers has averaged more than a book a year for over twenty years now, and the latest volume to appear in English, "Philosophy Is for Everyman," is one of the less significant among these. It comprises a series of 13 television lectures that deal in less than 10 pages each with such subjects as "Universe and Life," "Knowledge of the Ground," "Man," "Love" and "Death." It is wonderful that a man in his eighties should have the vitality to toss off such books between his bulkier tomes, some of them 1,000 pages long; but this is hardly a "course in philosophical thinking," as the German title and the English subtitle insist: such cut-and-dried pages are more apt to forestall philosophical thinking.

It would be pointless to contrast this TV dinner with a superior example of French fare or with Heidegger's heavy Teutonic mess. But in two crucial ways Jaspers's new little book is unfortunately representative of much of existentialism, and it is worthwhile to ask what has become of this attempt at a revolution in philosophy.

By going back to our most extreme experiences, all of the Big Three hoped to make a fresh start and to reorient academic philosophy. Yet "Being and Time" and, perhaps to a lesser extent, "Being and Nothingness" have also obstructed philosophical thinking. By interposing an almost impenetrable jargon between us and the phenomena they discuss, they have impeded serious reflection on death, anguish and guilt. What has been debated, both in seminars and in print, is what various sentences might mean and how best to translate this phrase or that.

This leads us straight to the other great failure. Nietzsche once said, and not only Kierkegaard but also many young people who feel attracted to existentialism might well agree: "Of all that is written I love only what a man has written with his blood." In Sartre's wartime works one occasionally felt something of the experience of the resistance. But in most of the philosophic essays of 20th-century existentialism there is talk of extreme experiences; but it remains bloodless chatter of precisely the kind that Heidegger denounced as inauthentic

in "Being and Time": talk attuned to the curiosity of "everyman."

The existentialist philosophers have lost hold of the difference between talk and a good book. But what makes bright conversation or even a good lecture does not usually make a good book.

Colin Wilson's airy attempt to replace "the old existentialism" with his "Introduction to the New Existentialism" invites the very same criticism. Still in his thirties, Wilson has published over a dozen books since 1960, and his new volume "is an attempt to present the basic arguments of the 'Outsider sequence' [the six volumes setting forth his own philosophy] in a simple and nontechnical language for the ordinary intelligent reader.

The first half of the new book offers a historical survey that is marred by breathtaking misrepresentations of Descartes, Kant and Husserl. Then comes the central charge against "the old existentialism": it was pessimistic, while Wilson, taking heart from man's "peak experiences," is optimistic. But his brisk chatter and constant name-dropping cannot allay the impression that his optimism is as shallow as his unreflective contrast of "optimism" and "pessimism."

ONLY his claims are impressive: "the 'new existentialism' is a revolution in psychology"; it involves "a revolution in philosophy"; its "true 'founder' . . . is Nietzsche"; Merleau-Ponty's works "may be taken as elementary textbooks of 'the new existentialism'"; and "Wittgenstein was the great forerunner." All this approximates advertising more than arguments, and "the new existentialism" is a gimmick rather than a philosophy. To return to culinary metaphors: an oral soufflé collapses in print.

Although we are told on the dust jacket that Wilson's first book was translated into 17 languages, few scholars would mention him in the same breath with the Big Three "old" existentialists. Allowing for great differences in stature, it is still worth noting that none of the men discussed here trust reason to present their views and to marshal the evidence for them, while also carefully considering objections. They have all become interpreters—with an uncanny predilection for the paths of least resistance.

Jaspers's thousands of pages in "The Great Philosophers," "Nietzsche," and "Schelling," on Marx, Freud and a host of others whose views he claims to report, are not based on the methods of sound historiography; nor are Heidegger's voluminous studies of Nietzsche, Hölderlin, and many others: both men prefer what Nietzsche called "monumental" historiography or, as we might say, an inspirational approach. And Sartre's critique of psychoanalysis (Continued on Page 31)

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and his prolix attempt to reinterpret Marxism are equally unencumbered by a historical conscience.

All three writers approximate homiletics, which helps to explain the tremendous bulk of their output. Much of the rest of their work is self-exegesis: summaries of, introductions to, or reflections on their own philosophies; and the best book one of the Big Three has published in years is an autobiography, Sartre's "The Words."

My view that Sartre is the most remarkable of the Big Three is no longer as strange now as it seemed 10 or 15 years ago. In 1953, when the original edition of Alfred Stern's "Sartre" appeared, the many derisive passages probably bothered few readers, and the author's demonstration of striking similarities between Sartre's ideas and those of some earlier writers (notably Nietzsche, Alfred Adler and Ortega) helped to confirm a widespread underestimation of Sartre. (Even so, Stern did not fathom the full measure of Sartre's debts to Nietzsche and Jaspers.)

THE "revised and enlarged edition" of Stern's book, just published, retains his sarcastic commentaries in the text but begins by noting that "the international status of Existentialism has changed. The Existentialist [sic] night clubs in Paris closed, but the lecture halls of the world's universities were opened to Existentialism." Now that Sartre has become thoroughly respectable, Stern sees him as "a pure lover of wisdom, a true philosopher." Surely, these epithets are as inapt as the charge that part of Sartre's work is "pornographic."

The major three existentialists tried to introduce into philosophy concerns that had long been central in literature and in religion, but none of them has succeeded in writing a great philosophical book. The proudest achievements of 20th-century existentialism are still some of Sartre's *literary* works. Moreover, Sartre raised, more vividly than anyone else—and here Jaspers followed Sartre's example—the question of the civic responsibilities of intellectuals; but space forbids any discussion here of their writings on politics. In philosophy the Big Three have remained epigones, not in the same league with their ancestor, Nietzsche.

Author's Query

TO THE EDITOR:

I would appreciate drawings and other relative information for study of O. S. Kinney (c. 1860), Chicago architect.

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