Principles and Persons
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Principles and Persons: An Ethical Interpretation of Existentialism.

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Among contemporary philosophical movements, none has addressed itself more directly to ethical issues than has existentialism. As popularly understood, it is, in fact, not so much an ethical theory as itself an ethical attitude; and in this form it has attracted and repelled large numbers of people who have no knowledge of the philosophical position on which this attitude is allegedly based. As a result, "existentialism" has come to designate almost any sort of unconventional or arbitrary style of living or thinking; and the very idea that an understanding of existentialism might require the making of careful distinctions and sustained argument would undoubtedly strike many of its partisans and its critics as incongruous.

This state of affairs is unfortunate because, as I hope to show, the real interest of existentialism lies not in any special affinity it may have with the contemporary Zeitgeist nor in the self-conscious attitudinizing it has inspired, but in what it has to say about the nature of value and choice and moral freedom. It is as an ethical theory, i.e., as a reasoned interpretation of the fundamental concepts of morality, that existentialism deserves serious consideration; and it is as an ethical theory and not as a set of prescriptions for our moral practice that it will be presented and appraised in this book. Whether or not that theory has implications, direct or indirect, for the conduct of life is, of course, one of the principal questions that a study like this will have to consider. But it is important to see that this is itself a question of ethical theory, and that it must be answered at the level of ethical
theory before any existentialist ethic in the usual sense can be promulgated.\(^1\)

In this connection, it must be noted in passing that most current philosophical accounts of existentialism do little to correct mistaken popular assumptions, particularly with respect to the alleged irrationalism of the existentialist ethic. One recent study, for example, explicitly endorses the prevalent view of existentialism as the philosophy of irrationalism and defends it as such, apparently on the ground that man has in fact been shown to be strongly influenced by irrational motives and drives.\(^2\) It is not difficult, to be sure, to collect passages from the writings of the existentialists which sound very much like a repudiation of reason and a glorification of action for action's sake. In most cases, however, it turns out on closer inspection that the point being made is a point about the nature and circumstances of human action and not a piece of special pleading in favor of some drastically curtailed conception of our responsibilities as moral agents. In short, if existentialist ethical theory is to be described as "irrationalistic" at all, it must be understood that the rationality in question is one that it regards as merely specious and delusive; and it must be pointed out that within their positive account of human action the existentialists make room for what we ordinarily call reasons for acting. Certainly existentialism involves a re-interpretation of the "place of reason in ethics," but it is unfair and inaccurate to represent it as exalting instinct and impulse at the expense of deliberation and foresight in the conduct of life. There is much that is highly controversial in the existentialist po-


\(^2\) William Barrett, *Irrational Man* (New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1958). In this book, existentialism is declared to be "the counter-Enlightenment come at last to philosophical expression," and its message is said to be "to bring the whole man—the concrete individual in the whole context of his everyday life, and his total mystery and questionableness—into philosophy." (p. 274–75) For a better balanced account that is also more detailed in its treatment of points of philosophical interest, see James Collins, *The Existentialists: A Critical Study* (Chicago: H. Regnery Co., 1952).
sition, correctly understood, but I shall try to show that what is at issue is not whether the existentialists are giving bad moral advice but whether their general interpretation of the relation of individual choice to moral rules is a correct one.

To treat existentialism as an ethical theory may occasion surprise for many reasons, not least among them the fact that the chief existentialist writers have in some cases explicitly disclaimed any interest in such an interpretation of their thought and in others have failed to present anything readily recognizable as an analysis of leading ethical concepts. It is certainly true that neither Heidegger nor Sartre has given more than a sketch of an ethical theory in the current Anglo-American sense of that term; but I hope to show that the difficulty of recognizing even that sketch for what it is is due to the special philosophical context in which it is developed and more specifically to the unfamiliar philosophical idiom in which it is presented. None of the philosophers whose views will be considered in this book conceives of philosophy as a whole or of philosophical ethics in particular as an activity of conceptual analysis. They are all in their different ways ontologists, and their views of the nature of value are accordingly stated in terms of "structures" that are held to be particular to certain modes of being. The central contention of this book is that it is both possible and worthwhile to disengage the elements of an ethical theory from the forbidding ontological terminology which the existentialists use and to restate them in terms that are intelligible to those philosophers who do not share this special "ontological" orientation.

In spite of the hazards that such an attempt to translate out of one philosophical idiom into another inevitably faces, there is reason to think that the resulting restatement of existentialist ethical theory may have real advantages over the original by virtue of lending itself less readily to a number of misinterpretations that distort much current discussion of existentialism. It can also contribute materially to the correcting of the widespread but erroneous belief that the interests and views of European philosophers of the phenomenological persuasion are absolutely different from those of philosophers in this country and in Great Britain. While such differences obviously exist, it is one of the
guiding assumptions of this study that there has been nevertheless a substantial parallelism in the development of ethical theory on the Continent and in the English-speaking countries during the twentieth century. More specifically, I think it can be shown that much contemporary moral philosophy in this country and England of the kind that is usually called "prescriptivistic" or "non-cognitivistic" has close affinities with the ethical theory of existentialism, and that both are descended from a common tradition of ethical theory of which the principal stages are briefly outlined in Part I.

The common strain that unites the ethical theories assignable to this tradition is their progressive elaboration of the idea of moral autonomy and their substitution of this idea for the older conception of moral truth as the fundamental concept of morals. I have accordingly presented the ethical theory of existentialism as essentially an attempt to give a definitive account of what autonomous moral personality is; and I have neglected many other aspects of the existentialists' contribution to ethical theory. I have also been led, by this choice of a focus for this study, to use as my primary representatives of the "ethical theory of existentialism" only those writers who conceive moral autonomy as the final and ineluctable condition of man and not as a kind of interim state that may possibly be surmounted by an eventual intuition of ultimate being or by a mystical communion with God. As I understand them, this view is the one held by those religious or Christian existentialists who, like Marcel and Jaspers, are critical of traditional metaphysical conceptions of natural teleology, but do not despair entirely of the possibility of an external source

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4 I have in mind especially the work of R. M. Hare whose principal works, The Language of Morals (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952) and Freedom and Reason (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963) show many obvious points of affinity with the views of such existentialists as Sartre. It would not do, however, to press these affinities too hard, as Hare's essay, "'Rien n'a d'importance,'" in La philosophie analytique (Cahiers de Royaumont, Philosophie, No. 4 [Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1962], pp. 305-19) clearly shows.
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of moral direction. By contrast, Heidegger and Sartre, at least in a certain period of their philosophical development, do seem to me to have committed themselves to the idea of moral autonomy in a truly radical way, and to have produced a view of value that breaks much more sharply with established traditions in ethical theory than does that of the religious existentialists. Needless to say, all of the general statements I make about the “ethical theory of existentialism” must be understood as applying only to this more restricted group of writers—Heidegger and Sartre, together with Maurice Merleau-Ponty and a number of French writers who seem to be principally influenced by them. Even in the case

5 For a study of these philosophers and of the relationship of their views to one another, see Paul Ricoeur, Gabriel Marcel et Karl Jaspers (Paris: Editions du Temps Présent, 1948). Both Jaspers and Marcel have written extensively on what they regard as the spiritual and moral crisis of our time, and these works have done much to identify existentialism as a philosophy which addresses itself to the variously defined malaise of modern Western civilization. See Jaspers’ Die geistige Situation der Zeit (Berlin: W. de Gruyter and Co., 1931) and Marcel’s Les hommes contre l’humain (Paris: La Colombe, 1951). A critical review of Sartre’s L’Être et le néant can be found in Marcel’s Homo Viator (Paris: Aubier, Editions Montaigne, 1945), pp. 233–256.

6 Even in the case of Heidegger and Sartre, some question arises as to whether they have maintained this position in their more recent work. It seems clear to me, as it has to many critics, that Heidegger’s writings from the late thirties onward reflect a quite different spirit and a quite different conception of the relationship of man to being than was characteristic of his earlier works; and I have accordingly based my interpretation of his thought mainly on the latter, especially Sein und Zeit (8th ed.; Halle: M. Niemeyer, 1957) and Vom Wesen des Grundes (4th ed.; Frankfurt-am-Main: V. Klostermann, 1955). Similarly, my treatment of Sartre rests primarily on L’Être et le néant; and while, as I try to show in Chapter VIII, the doctrines he is developing in his still incomplete Critique de la raison dialectique (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), are an extension rather than a repudiation of ideas he had developed earlier, I have relied heavily on only one section of that work.

7 In this group, I would cite particularly Raymond Polin, whose La création des valeurs (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1944) was one of the first statements in French of a non-cognitivistic theory of value; and Francis Jeanson, whose Le problème morale et la pensée de Sartre (2d ed.; Paris: Editions du Myrte, 1965) offers an interesting interpretation of Sartre’s treatment of morality—an interpretation to which Sartre gave his express approval in the preface he contributed to the book. Simone de Beauvoir’s Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté (Paris: Gallimard, 1947) is useful for such light as it casts on Sartre’s thought; and her larger work, Le deuxième sexe (Paris: Gallimard, 1949) contains much material that has an indirect bearing on questions of morality and moral theory. A highly original account of moral
of this restricted group, however, the account I give in Part I is intended primarily as a delineation of a type of ethical theory rather than as a faithful textual study of their *ipsissima verba*. My principal interest throughout has been to state clearly a very general position in ethical theory that is shared by a group of writers, and to do so without too great a concern for minor divergencies among them. In the footnotes to each chapter, however, I have given rather extensive references to the texts on which my interpretations are based; and I have also tried to illustrate in several especially important cases the principles of philosophical “translation” on which I have relied.

My original intention was to follow the historical review, in Part I, of the development of the ethical theory of existentialism with a full-scale restatement and defense of that theory in its mature form along the lines of interpretation I propose in Chapter V. I found this too ambitious a task, however, and I have chosen instead to deal in Part II with only three major questions that confront the ethical theory of existentialism. These questions concern: first, the adequacy of the grounds alleged by the existentialists for rejecting all objectivistic theories of value; second, the relationship between particular choices and universal moral principles; and finally, the place of moral obligation and moral community in an ethical theory based on the concept of autonomy. Criticism of the ethical aspect of existentialism frequently centers on these questions, and it must be admitted that the difficulties raised by critics have not often been met or even squarely faced by the leading existentialist writers. I believe that the objections to which I have alluded *can* be successfully answered and I have accordingly tried to show how the ethical theory of existentialism can be amplified and refined in such a way as to make it less vulnerable to criticism and misunderstanding on these three cru-
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...cially important points. At the same time, while I feel that the kind of reconstructed existentialism I propose remains consistent with the deepest inspiration of the writers on whom I draw as my primary sources and is in fact adumbrated in their writings, I recognize that my emendations may strike some readers as dilutions of the authentic and heady brew of existentialism with an insipid analytical thinner. I would simply ask those who may be unable to recognize any true affinity between the existentialism of Heidegger and Sartre and the reformulation I propose, to consider the latter on its own merits alone without any concern for its degree of faithfulness to such originals, and with full appreciation of the seriousness of the criticisms it is designed to meet.