

of these two great poets should be writing exquisite poetry about the Mysteries of the Faith in the old language of a small nation which, apparently, knows not where to lift its eyes.

---

## METAPHYSICS AND LANGUAGE

### An Introduction to the Problem

COLUMBA RYAN, O.P.

**T**HERE are at present two moods in contemporary philosophy, the existentialist's and the technician's. The existentialist mood is disillusioned, sophisticated, desperately mature. The technical mood has no illusions; is without suspicion of naïveté, confidently accepts itself as adult. For they are both moods that belong to our time, one of the more terrible features of which is that its children go to the wall.

To the existentialist, the world in which he lives, with its everyday concerns, its inventions and schemes, is through and through suspect. He sees past its pretences. At its noblest, at its most pretentious, no less than in its trivialities and ignominies, he knows it to be flat and uninteresting, a substitute world, unauthentic. He sees through it to the basic nothingness that its false pretences disguise. He knows, besides, his own core of nothingness. And he dares to face his consequent consuming passion for the destruction of that substitute world which it is the doom of his own unqualified freedom to project upon the undifferentiated ground of nothingness that encompasses him. So with the emancipated cynicism of a man not only lacking hope, but lacking even the desire of hope, he descends (impregably arrogant in his anguish) into the pit of absolute despair. He recognises his proper human status as cast there; recognises the radical absurdity of his existence at the edge of the irrational abyss of un-being.

To the technician this mood is the stuff of extravagant nightmare, the word-spinnings of metaphysical speculation. To him the absorbing interest is the exact computation and planning of a world dismissed by the existentialist as substitute. He recognises nothing more authentic than this domain of the human reason employed in logical discourse and practical exploitation of the material available. Without passion, with the cool exactness of

any other precision instrument, the machinery of his reasoned enquiry proceeds upon analysis and interpretation, checked at every point by the relentless scrutiny of its own readings and registrations; a scrutiny of the linguistic symbols which constitute its progressive constructions. Dangerous to enquire of what these symbols are the readings and registrations. That is to dig deeper than his method permits; his method must be scientific, it may not risk interesting metaphysical insights which penetrate beyond the immediate data of its own concerns or results. That way lies the fantasy of speculative philosophy. The technician prefers the clear demarcations of registrations, symbols, figural constructions. Anything else he denounces, from the clarity of his logical observation post, as meaningless nonsense. The traditional metaphysician, with his unverifiable talk of being and Godhead, seems to be mumbling; the existentialist to be uttering the language of pathological melodrama. On the other hand, to the existentialist, and even to the traditional metaphysician, the preoccupation of contemporary academic philosophers with problems of language, of sense data and their logical constructions, of procedural rules for statements and the like, is so much preoccupation with the trivial, or at best the peripheral, in philosophy.

In a future article it may be possible to make some critical examination of these two dominant moods from the point of view of Catholic and Dominican traditions of thought. For the present I propose merely to make an assessment of what it is that constitutes the contemporary appeal of these two moods: the existentialist's, which is, for all its deviations, metaphysical in character; and the technician's, which in practice becomes an exercise in linguistic analysis; and to suggest how they should be met.

It is not accidental that these two moods hold the minds of contemporary men; they reflect the condition of our times. The astonishing technical advances made by men in the last fifty years, the functionalism everywhere introduced into design and organisation—all this contributes overwhelming prestige to the ideal, as type of perfection, of the technical approach, and by its very success warrants almost any demand for revision made in its name. Working precision, elimination of everything that may appear superfluous or inhibitive of efficiency, prescription of rules in formulae approximating as nearly as possible to the formal

language of the physical sciences or the law; these seem to be the demands made upon the disciplined mind in the name of a triumphant technique. If cherished beliefs and ways of life, if human values themselves, have in some measure to be sacrificed, it is in the name of a discipline that has proved itself by success. Man has but to bow before his own achievement, even though it be the discovery of himself as a combination of robot, calculating machine, and chemical components.

Very different is the source of Existentialism. Not the success, but the utter disarray, of the modern scene here imposes itself. It has always been the case; advances have never been made without attendant confusion. There is no birth of a new society without the break-up of the old, and in this break-up everything is called in question; every belief held suspect, ancient good found to be evil, and evil good. 'When in the decline of Hellenic civilisation belief in the cosmos was shaken, the Gnostic religion, penetrating from Mesopotamia and Syria into the Eastern marches of the Mediterranean world, attempted a radical transvaluation of values, and it was particularly successful where it posed as the Christian heresy called Manichaeism. In the anguished vision of Gnostic mythology, the divinely ordered universe was transformed into a dungeon. The Father of Light was acquitted of the responsibility for creating it and the rôle of a demiurge was allotted to an evil demon. The stars in their orbits no longer proclaimed the rational wonders of a celestial mathematics, but their malignant light traced the weary round of the demoniac prison guards holding watch on the ramparts of the world. Meanwhile, deep down in the pit, in the solitary confinement of its prison cell, the spirit of man languished, oppressed by the darkness of the senses and lashed by the lusts of the flesh.'<sup>1</sup> This passage is an unusually stimulating introduction to Existentialist thought and literature in its widest manifestations. The author, Professor Kuhn of the University of Erlangen, compares, at this point in his book, this demoniacal universe of the Gnostics with the Heideggerian conception of the world. It is a comparison (in the author's intention merely incidental) that I find most suggestive, and one that can illuminate the whole question of a Catholic approach to Existentialism. It

<sup>1</sup> *Encounter with Nothingness: An Essay on Existentialism*. By Helmut Kuhn. Methuen; 8s. 6d.

will be useful before developing this point to follow out Professor Kuhn's general theme.

His aim is to interpret to the Anglo-Saxon peoples a movement of thought which, whatever the reason, appears to appeal more readily to continental thinkers than to those of America or of this country. In a series of chapters he discusses with an admirable mixture of sympathy and criticism the central concepts, in their origin and meaning, of the various leading Existentialists, in particular Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Jaspers and Sartre. Without merging the very different approaches and outlooks of the thinkers named in unwarrantable confusion, Professor Kuhn succeeds in drawing out the themes common to them all, or rather the experience, the philosophical encounter, through which each has passed, however different their interpretation of that encounter.

The encounter is that extreme outcome of doubt voiced, originally in a religious context, by Kierkegaard, the terrible doubt of the unbelieving believer whose conscience forbids him to surrender his faith, and whose Hegelian reason forbids him to yield himself to it. Torn by the impossibility of unbelief and the impossibility of faith, Kierkegaard entered into the nothingness of 'irony', 'the attitude of one who can play with everything because he is committed to nothing'. Kierkegaard himself appears to have looked upon this dialectical phase as a kind of *praeparatio evangelica* in which the human soul is prepared for the overwhelming advent, in faith, of God; the necessary reduction of the overweening spirit of human sufficiency. But Professor Kuhn suggests that Kierkegaard was in fact having it both ways, audaciously playing with the temptation to despair whilst seeking at the same time 'to make love secure'. And there is indeed more than a suggestion in Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works, and in his Journals, that he was pathologically in love with his spiritual *malaise* and unwilling to forego its luxury in favour of any more total surrender to the healing Word of God. Whether Professor Kuhn does justice or not to Kierkegaard in this matter, he does show that in the historical development of the existentialist movement since his time Kierkegaard's doubts have proved more effective than his faith. Or rather, the doubts afflicting the nineteenth-century romantic consciousness in Europe, of which Kierkegaard gave the earliest and most tortured expression, have proved more effective than his particular escape from them by

B

way of the divine intervention of faith.

Outside a Protestant religious consciousness like Kierkegaard's the doubts turn into the torment of man's estrangement in the world around him. It is not that, driven by his conscience to believe, he finds himself unable to believe; but that, impelled by his deep-seated metaphysical need to make sense of the world, he finds himself in a universe void of significance, the very antithesis of Bishop Berkeley's universe of divine signs. 'There are no signs.' This is at the opposite pole to the orderly cosmos of Greek thought, with its ever present memory of the Platonic Good at its head, the master-sign. It is a world in which man is a stranger, but not a pilgrim, for he is not at the same time a citizen of any world more constant and enduring. Rather, this estrangement in the world is the sinister projection of his temporality and contingency; which is to say that man, in his refusal to admit the temporal character of his existence, interposes a world of illusion projected over against himself, a universe as false as it is cowardly. And from this world there is no positive deliverance; there is possible only the hopeless acceptance of fundamental senselessness, and the terrible freedom that then devolves upon the individual responsible (to himself alone) for fashioning his destiny.

Indeed, the individual makes his own world, is his world; *his* world (there is no such thing as *the* world); the concrete 'now' which encloses within itself the past recollected and the future anticipated. In such a 'world' no truth is found but the truth proper to the concrete individual: his truth as it is relevant or useful to him. There is no room for contemplation, only for avid exploitation. And the exploitation, the subjective truth, must indeed be avid, passionate, if it is to be truth at all; for it must be something in which the subject is wholly engaged, by the passionate concern for his own being. Estranged in a world of his own making, man's only way to truth is by the passionate commitment of himself to its development.

Professor Kuhn, in succeeding chapters, traces the dialectic by which the different existential thinkers seek to pass from this total estrangement to a crisis of choice. There is first the descent into that pit of despair which is a vacuity of mind smitten by the encounter with nothingness. A symbolic embodiment of that inner boredom of the soul is found in the great cities of the industrial age, 'places of disaffection', where, in T. S. Eliot's

words, there is only 'tumid apathy with no concentration'. Plunged in this anguish, man oscillates between paralysed inaction and the demoniac frenzy of action which is mere escape from inaction, wholly destructive. Only when this parody (it is no more) of the dark night of the soul is fathomed to its depth does the change come. Man is driven to a choice. But this is not choice in any usual sense, not a choice of alternatives, not the naïve choice between good and evil. It is something more akin to the Stoic acceptance of fate; it is the willing of despair itself, the voluntary plunge into despair by which despair, becoming absolute, is no longer, in its intensity, desperate. For now, in a total hopelessness, with nothing longed for, despair surrenders even its own ground; in this extreme situation the individual reaches authenticity at last; the existence that is no longer in flight, no longer in bad faith, no longer a repudiation of its own inescapable and unfounded freedom. The choice of despair, made absolute, is the choice of unqualified freedom; this again is 'no preferential choice but . . . the movement of existence towards a climax of intensity' in which the individual attains anguished awareness of the freedom that he cannot escape. Terror assails him; terror at the nihilation of Being by Nothingness. The *dénouement* is the much-vaunted existentialist 'leap', the final achievement of a foothold beyond the abyss. But here, beyond fear, beyond despair, in the perfect self-possession of authentic existence, here 'it is impossible', in Professor Kuhn's words, 'to continue this story'.

What is it that makes so strong an appeal to the contemporary mind in this strange, exacerbated account of the existence of man? Surely the sense that pervades it of passing beyond the shallow pretences of a world in disintegration to the authentic beyond. No matter that authenticity is terrible to its discoverer; man is equal even to its nihilism.

It is, I think, important to emphasise this positive motivation of Existentialist thought if one is not to be led astray by its outwardly more impressive nihilistic aspect. It is here that the parallel with Gnostic Manichaeism can be turned to account. With Manichaeism, too, one is at first inclined to be impressed before all else by its absorption with evil. But that is, perhaps, to miss the true genius of the thing. It does not explain the hold that this doctrine in various forms has over people; or why it should have

exercised so strong a fascination in successive periods of disintegration. It happened at the turn of the Christian era when the new world of European culture was emerging from the ruins of the Hellenic heritage; again in the thirteenth century, with the Albigensian movement, when feudal society was giving way to the new urban and national life of Europe; and now once more, with Existentialism, at a period when technical progress at once demolishes the old order, and thrusts upon us a shape of things that we do not yet understand. At such times, when long-tried ways of thought and old conventions fail, what men look for is, essentially, the 'authentic'. It is only accidental to this, however inevitably accidental, that they are disposed to accept the extremest consequences of their search. It is not the dominance of evil in the material world that fascinates the Manichee; it is not despair at the nothingness at the heart of being that holds the Existentialist, but the determination to accept the authentic in all its starkness. Standardised values, established truths, secure conventions; these in their very fixity will be rejected by the disillusioned children of crisis.

If this be so, it is idle to meet such a movement by argument alone; and foolish merely to oppose it. Its mood must be recognised, its thirst for the authentic satisfied. Any suspicion of the counterfeit must be removed. The mood demands a metaphysical doctrine, deeply founded in contemporary experience and set in contemporary language, but it demands also a way of life. When St Dominic encountered a similar mood in the Albigensian movement, his answer was simple and exacting: basic doctrine and life—in his own case religious life—stripped of the conventional; austere, visibly authentic. It was an answer that laid the foundation for a philosophy that proved equal to new beginnings. Thomism, developing from the spirit of St Dominic, was able to synthesise the deep craving for the real with the new technical demands of the time; the Aristotelian learning, the new logic, the sociological developments. In our own time we have yet to discover the spirit of St Dominic, that will meet the two moods of the day and, in philosophy, to repair the breach between the demand for a metaphysic and the demand for a technique, the breach between Existentialism and linguistics.