

# *The Contribution of Existentialism* \*

TRUMAN G. MADSEN\*\*

Existentialism is in the air.<sup>1</sup> In America, at all levels of culture, its influence, especially during the past decade, has been pervasive. But for one whose outlook is shaped (as is my own) by resolute committal to science, the gains of recent formal and linguistic philosophy, and the general optimism of America, this movement is often treated with studied neglect and extreme distrust.

This distrust is reflected in the *ad hominem*s that recur in discussion: that the origin of the movement is Continental catastrophe; that it is a giant psychic and cultural moan; that it is morbid, even pathological; that its writers are methodless, irrational, subjective, irresponsible, oracular; that its theses are a cloak for social and moral aberration; that its place, if it has one, is with tragic literature or perhaps with case books on human delusion under crisis. In short, the movement is identified with its least tolerable thinkers and dismissed.<sup>2</sup> For all this there is more than an atom of justification.

But today a decreasing number of thinkers in this country are indulging these genetic fallacies.<sup>2</sup> The serious question is being asked, "What, irrespective of sources, can be learned from this colossus of thought?" And answers based on actual appropriations can be made from the perspectives of literature, religion, art, psychology and psychotherapy, and all branches of philosophy.

The widest gap remaining, still a veritable chasm, is that between existentialism and recent Anglo-American philosophy, especially contemporary logical empiricism or analytic thought.<sup>3</sup> It is in this context, where appraisal awaits more extensive communication and understanding, that I wish to pose the question.

Taking broad unifying themes and ignoring areas of sub-

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\*\*Dr. Madsen is assistant professor of philosophy and religion at B.Y.U.

stantial internal difference, I propose to compare these two movements under four headings: method and language, ultimates of being and knowing, concrete findings for man, and decision. Exposition will give way to an illustration, the issue of human freedom, emphasizing contrasts and compatibilities. This development in turn will lead to a summary judgment of the significance, in terms of projected influences, of existentialism for present American thought.<sup>4</sup> I shall presuppose familiarity with the analytic literature and reference space will be devoted to fountainhead works of the existentialists. At the outset I shall strive to use the idiom of each camp with little interplay.

### *Method and Language*

Analytic philosophy aims at concept-clarification and the analysis of consistency and validity in logical, scientific, and ordinary language. On its scientific side it is typically phenomenal and/or physicalistic in method, allied with strict criteria of meaning and sense-confirmation. Its data are properly operational, viz. "public," repeatable, sense-confirmable. Correlation and formulation of data are attempted in language that is precise and mathematical.

Existentialism is phenomenological.<sup>5</sup> It advocates the careful introspective scrutiny of the whole range of human consciousness. Reality (or "existence") is apprehended through the "participation" or "encounter" of the total self. The impact and meaning of such insight usually transcends sense-experience. Hence the data of existential analyses are often private, unique, vague. It follows that its language is indirect, symbolic, heavily connotative.<sup>6</sup> Metaphors, ciphers, aphorisms, paradox, and their variants occur constantly in existential literature and the content seems more associative than analytic, more recollective than representational.<sup>7</sup> Yet the expression of the depth-self, the "Ursprung" or center of personality in its awareness of reality is held to be not merely evincive of subjective states, but revelatory of being-itself.

### *Ultimates of Being and Knowing*

Analytic philosophy is concerned with relations in the natural order for purposes of prediction and control, and with the



removal of linguistic stumbling-blocks. All genuine problems are scientific or linguistic. No "ultimate principles" of being or knowing are sought. Such an enterprise is accounted meaningless or futile. Epistemic or metaphysical presuppositions are acknowledged only as proposals or functions to be altered or rejected according to the (scientific) job-in-hand. Many issues are thus not solved but dissolved. "Values" are usually reduced to emotion or attitude or conventions.

Existentialism is concerned with the ultimate grounds of being and knowing and valuing. With new urgency it presses the classical questions of existence, thus far emphasizing *human* existence or *dasein*. Why is there something and not nothing? What is being-itself? What, phenomenologically, is man? What is truth? What is the meaning of time, change, history? What are the foundations of commitment, of faith, of self-fulfillment? These genuine, indeed crucial, problems lie beyond science and language. There *are* limits to inquiry—the transcendent, the elusive, the mysterious—but these limits are discovered, imposed by reality not by stipulations of method.<sup>8</sup>

### *Concrete Findings for Man*

For analytic philosophy man is the analyst not the analyzed. "Findings" are piecemeal, detached from the stream of practical awareness, and pertain to language and the natural order. Its mood, if this is calculable, is one of aloof security.

Existentialism aims at an authentic portrayal of man's modern predicament or situation, in strokes that are broad and deep. Some of its insights (in a different terminology) have been defended by American writers to whom it is unrelated.<sup>9</sup> But however numerous its precursors or unofficial allies,<sup>10</sup> its message and polemic are unique on the modern scene. Its mood is one of stark and dark involvement, of the agonized awareness of living at the foot of a volcano or at the edge of an abyss.

Compressed to a paragraph, here is the existentialist portrait of 20th Century man:

Man exists in a condition of alienation—from himself, from others, from the "transcendent." He lives under the inescapable threat of nothingness (Sartre) or non-being, of failure to

actualize himself, to become what he is (Kierkegaard). His contingency or finitude yields care (Sorge) and anxiety (Angst). Though in-the-world and with-others man is isolated and alone, cut off from genuine communication. He is "leveled" by the masses, by technology, by the standardizations of an organized age, until he is an *anonymos* "das man" (Kierkegaard, Marcel, Heidegger). He is subject to several awesome limits or boundaries (Jaspers) which bear in upon him and from which there is no exit (Sartre). These include passion and repetition (Kierkegaard); the body (Marcel); chance, suffering, conflict, crisis (Jaspers); guilt, temporality, death (Heidegger); mood, monotony meaninglessness (Sartre); agonistic struggle (Unamuno); and ultimate concern (Tillich). The individual *exists* in these dimensions regardless of his proximate goals or theoretical denials. In his grasp of reality man moves through stages (Kierkegaard) or levels (Tillich) ranging from sensory immediacy to rational schematization. But these and all others are transcended by and permeated by the depth-level, the level of ultimate and abiding significance.<sup>11</sup>

This ontology of man is clearly the center of gravity in the movement to which all its remaining theses are intimately related if they are not actually derived.<sup>12</sup> Their distance from the means and ends of analytic thought is obvious.

### *Decision*

Analytic philosophy is limited to inductive probability; its theoretical structure, hypotheses and results are tentative. At every level it is subject, by its own insistence, to revision or rejection. Evidence is a matter of degree or weight. In the absence or balance of evidence the only intelligent course, assumed or tacitly recommended, is suspension.

Existentialism underlines the inescapability of choice. With respect to life issues we face an either/or. Decisions are either made *by* us, by our whole selves, in which case they are authentic, or made *for* us in which case they are diluted by the ongoing pressures of life. Either way, by active choice or passive permission, infinite consequences accrue. "Suspension" is in fact impossible. It too is a choice, however hesitant or prudential, and everything is being gained or lost.<sup>13</sup>



## II

Turning now to a classical issue, as a kind of paradigm, we may observe how these diverse approaches fare in application. The issue: Is man in any sense free?

### *Method*

The analyst turns immediately to linguistic questions and answers, and to the behavioral sciences where criteria of confirmation are sensate. The existentialist turns to the inward depth-awareness of the self. He offers no criteria except the phenomenological "Look and see."

### *Ultimates*

The analyst skirts the question, "Is man ultimately free?" and cognate ones as a pseudo-problem. Both "causality" and "freedom" require thorough therapeutic treatment before their functional meaning in science is vindicated, and causality has received far more attention than freedom. The tendency is to redefine freedom in the Hume-Schlick-Stevenson line as absence of external compulsion or freedom of action (not of decision) or as psychological ignorance of outcome.

The existentialist persists toward the ultimate. He wants to know about freedom not as a name for ignorance, or change, or a feeling, but as a *way of existing*. What would it mean, phenomenologically, to be free? What is the witness of the depth-self to the difference between *sein* and *dasein*, between subhuman and human existence?<sup>41</sup> Does man—can man—*exist* in a decisive, active, self-determining, even self-creating way?<sup>15</sup>

### *Concrete Results*

The guidance and findings of the analyst are mainly linguistic. He negates the way the problem has been formulated in the past (including the one above). He sharpens the elements of the puzzle. He warns against the linguistic remnants of outmoded faculty psychology, against the uncritical assumption of a "ghost in the machine," against hypostatizing of "self" or "will" or "soul." He explicates category mistakes and quasi-referential "the phrases" and reminds of the multiple functions of language. In his less cautious moments he inclines, sometimes overtly, to a deterministic view that man is likely one more link in the causal sequences.

The existentialist uncovers, paradoxically, the necessity of freedom, viz. he points to data which show that freedom with its inward resultants is the prius of all human thought and action even for those who suspect it as illusory. He uncovers the uncompromising data of the depth-self (not merely, it is claimed, the "sick self" but the every self): its guilt, its anguished recognition of alternatives and possibilities, its projects and commitments.<sup>16</sup> He shows the interrelationships of freedom as an existential datum with dread and choice and responsibility. Phenomenologically, he concludes, man is not a billiard ball, not even a very complex one. Man decides, he acts, he projects. No one, not the determinist and not the supposedly non-committal analyst, *exists* as if he were determined. If his freedom is diminished it is only because he has freely yielded it up. For the existentialist it is the paradoxical human plight that we are wholly responsible for choices which are forced and which require a "leap" beyond any factual estimate of consequences. We are condemned to be free.<sup>17</sup>

### *Decision*

The analyst having defined the problem away, decides only the preferential status of word-usage. Generally, the causal proposal (not a proposition) is defended as simple, adequate, fruitful in the scientific enterprise. No overt answer to the existentialist query is offered.

The existentialist commends and condones total commitment to freedom and all other "existentialia" of the depth-self. More, he derives an imperative: Choose in a total authentic way, not in a partial self-deceptive way! Indeed, aware of the risks involved, we *must* choose. Our decisions are not simply among specific courses of action, A or B or C, but among all-encompassing ways of life. We are confronted inescapably with Hamlet's question, "To be or not to be," and whatever the framework of choice are wholly responsible for our selves.<sup>18</sup> Suspension, so-called, may water down our control of our own lives, but it will not avoid the consequences. It is thus that the existentialist provides unconditional encouragement on *how* to choose, though little assurance on just *what* to choose.

In sum, the analyst redefines freedom, calls it a proposal, tentatively votes against freedom in the self-determining sense,



or claims to suspend judgment. The existentialist phenomenologically recovers the notion of freedom as a way of existing and derives an imperative: Choose totally!

To complete the apparent deadlock, one may show that the explanations offered by each camp for the errors—on this and many other issues—of its opponents are very similar. Thus the analyst reiterates three closely-related criticisms of the existentialist. (i) He is duped by an approach to knowledge that is arbitrary and in no sense empirical, (ii) He fails to examine the actual data, (iii) He is unclear on the distinction between the factually given and utterly subjective interpretation thereof.

Just these charges are made in the existentialist rejoinder:

Thus he argues (i) *The analyst is arbitrary and unempirical*. He is victim of an assumption, not at all warranted by "evidence" as he himself defines it, that all cognitive problems are either scientific or linguistic or both. Other matters lose out either by denial or default by a circular meaning-criterion which excommunicates from discussion whole ranges of data and affirmation. The analyst, in Marcel's way of speaking, substitutes sensation and language for being.<sup>19</sup>

(ii) *The analyst fails to examine the actual data*. Whether he evades the issue by his "pseudo-problem" ploy or makes certain covert assumptions, his skirting of the problem of freedom, and many others, is due to what Heidegger calls "relief seeking," a kind of semantic escapism. In the face of our dreadful freedom it is comforting to believe that we are thing-objects subject to total manipulation. Hence, the analyst flouts the primal deliverances of the depth-self, talks as if freedom is simply a verbal puzzle, and spurns all appeals to the immediate experience of freedom as "emotive" and "non-cognitive." For the existentialist his claim to a rigid dependence on the data available is sheer delusion. It is his unassailable inward conviction of freedom with its burdensome implications, not his science, that drives him to reject it.

(iii) *The analyst is unclear on the distinction between the factually given and utterly subjective interpretations thereof*. Having decried the classical and existentialist notions of freedom, even the very question, as meaningless, he nevertheless

retains covertly the conviction in attitude and action that the question *is* meaningful and that the answer is likely "no." This self-refuting error (which he conveniently avoids defending by the claim that his apparent determinism is not a statement or proposition but simply a fruitful methodological function) is followed by another. Having restricted the "given" to scientifically formulable sensation he violates his own scruples by his tacit conviction that the findings of science justify a deterministic extrapolation. In both cases his outlook is a stretch beyond the actually and factually given. It is a subjective interpretation.<sup>20</sup> It is a subtle form of that modern disease, "the objectification of man" which Kierkegaard scored against Hegel and which, with its innumerable effects, has been traced by existential writers. It is self-contradictory logically; but also existentially in that it vitiates the self of its genuine meaning and authenticity.

Thus the analyst's case against the existentialist is turned against himself, together with the unexpected charge of inconsistency.<sup>21</sup>

### III

With these contrasts before us we may now ask what the influence and contribution of existentialism may be for analytic thought, which is to say Anglo-American and scientific thought generally.

One prior question is whether partisan opposition of persons is an index to incompatibility of ideas. To what extent, it may be asked, are these widely divergent approaches reconcilable? Is a coherent inclusion or synthesis of both feasible? Is the disharmony peripheral rather than basic? The answer here, I believe, is in the negative. If the general contrasts we have drawn are not convincing on this point, the antitheses of our paradigm should remove all doubt. Yet from a detached standpoint, ignoring the illustration, it is not clear why this should be.

With respect to method and language there seems no *a priori* reason why the deliverances of sense should be at odds with the deliverances of the depth-self. There is, again, no *a priori* reason why language that is precise and mathematical



should be at odds with language that is expressively powerful, connotative, and subtle, or why either should be given superior cognitive status. But whatever may be said of possibilities, the actual cleavage persists. One cannot maintain with the analyst that whatever is not sensate and linguistically precise is non-cognitive, and at the same time agree with the existentialist that the profoundest cognitive awareness is utterly impenetrable to sense-experience and precise formulation. These theses are not only contradictory, but contrary.<sup>22</sup>

Again, as concerns scientific-linguistic conclusions vs. introspective-existential ones, there is no "in principle" opposition. The analyst is silent on the ontology of man as the existentialist is silent on the logic of word-usage. Their findings are about different things. Yet for each the silence harbors an implicit conviction that nothing significant is really being said by the other or, at least, that each is preoccupied with matters preliminary or unrelated to the real cognitive issues. This too then is a split which though conceivably avoidable, is actually unbridged.

The remaining two contrasts, i.e. proximate pragmatism vs. ultimates of being and knowing, and probability-suspension vs. total personal commitment, might be mediated by a two-aspect theory. Thus it could be argued that methodic restrictions and personal detachment are requisite to one sort of enterprise, while whole-life inclusion and personal involvement are appropriate to another. We follow one set of rules for science and another set for life. Attractive though this, and like-minded resolutions, may be, our freedom paradigm makes it clear that no such double-think is admissible. The competing perspectives and conclusions of these movements on the question of freedom are such that the adaptation of one to accommodate the other would be the equivalent of destruction. The conclusions are no less disparate than the starting-points and this is another reason the charges and counter-charges come to a stalemate. In practice, then, one cannot combine the stringent analytic refusal to ask and answer ultimate questions with the full-blown ontology of the existentialist. Nor can the detached use of the probability-calculus be squared with the plea for involved, participating commitment.

It must be admitted, then, that we have here two of the most distinctive outlooks in the history of thought, radically rival views each of which has a tremendous contemporary influence. In method, language, mood, motive, rationale, findings, and overall tone of thought they are poles apart. Though here and there apparently parallel or compatible, they are yet "in tension" at almost every point. And as with the problem of human freedom so with a host of other issues: they end opposed. Moreover, reflection on the controversies of our time will suggest that these two movements symbolize the crux-conflicts and the root divergencies of Western civilization.

Analytic philosophy and its scientific temper are profoundly enmeshed in the web of Anglo-American culture. They are far too well-entrenched, far too fruitful as a whole, to be in any literal sense replaced. Yet where two diverse movements clash in an epoch one can assume that if there is not revolution there may be supplementation, if not rejection of central theses, then the renewed scrutiny of them, if not influential examination from without, then from within.

It is probable that the contribution of existentialism to analytic thought will be of this less spectacular sort. Because of its radical character existentialism will serve as a reminder, even if from afar, of gaps, limitations, and provincialism in the means and ends of American thought. Not in revolutionary *discoveries*, but in stimulation toward *recovery* will its influence lie. Existentialism will open, wedge, and widen the door to reexamination and reconstruction, challenging reductive and exclusive tendencies, and reincorporating for serious study those seemingly invincible and inevitable elements of human consciousness which, by present analytic orthodoxy, have been neglected or ignored. It will loom large in its continual insistence that, whatever we make of it, the depth dimension is there, a dimension that can no longer be disposed of by resort to autobiographical epithets nor by methodic stipulations.

In just this way, then, existential method and language, its quest for ultimates, its concrete inward insight into twentieth-century man, and its portrayal of the anatomy of decision, have already stimulated much reexamination within the analytic tradition. But in these and related themes, the impact and contri-



bution of existentialism to American thought is still ahead of us.<sup>23</sup>

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1 The term existentialism was coined by F. H. Heinemann and is meant to focus human existence and to affirm at base (somewhat misleadingly) that "existence precedes essence," which untechnically means that one exists before he thinks and that thought (essence) never fully encompass existence. Negatively it attacks the modern Cartesian and scientific-mathematical view that reality is subject to clear and distinct, quantitative analysis and formulation. Positively it holds that being or reality in its concreteness, viz. "existence," is living, inward, personal. This thesis, and related ones, have vast bearings for logic, ontology, theory or knowledge, ethics and esthetics.

2 First-hand knowledge of the movement is still limited in America. Except for the works of Kierkegaard, which, in translated versions, have enjoyed a tremendous vogue, important and disciplined writings (as distinct from novels, plays and lighter works) of Sartre, Jaspers, Marcel, Heidegger, Buber, Berdyaev, Unamuno, and Tillich have not even been translated into English.

3 This is the present-day somewhat diversified offspring of the Vienna Circle, devoted to the formalization of science, symbolic logic, semantics, and analysis of language.

4 This means a fragmental but I hope central selection of issues. It also means a perilous abstraction from the social and historical roots of the movement, perhaps excusable in that many recent accounts err the other way.

5 The term, bequeathed by Husserl and Hartmann, has come to signify the effort toward the full and disciplined examination of the way things appear in consciousness; to describe, without hidden assumptions of method or system, the given factors. The process is not intuitive, or, if so, requires extreme patience and care. (Cf. Husserl's *Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft*, Logos, Vol. I, 1911).

6 Though its major philosophical works are heavy and technical, fiction, poetry, drama, and personal journals are a prominent vehicle of expression in the movement. In addition to such products of its philosophers, consider, for example, the works of Dostoevsky, Kafka, Rilke, de Beauvoir, Gide, Camus.

7 Paradox becomes a category of reality, almost, indeed, a test of truth. The analytic movement, by contrast, is devoted to uncovering and *removing* paradoxes, e.g. Russell's paradox, the antinomies of set-theory, and puzzles of ordinary language.

8 It is incorrect to say that analytic philosophy is dedicated to the rejection of metaphysics, existentialism to its renewal. Both movements are anti-traditional, and both are convinced that much of past philosophy has been devoted to "pseudo-problems." The difference lies in which problems are reinstated for study and on the criteria for deciding what sort of answers are relevant.

9 For example, in its emphasis on the scope of human awareness, the distortions of "objectification," the irreducible uniqueness of the individual, the risks of choice, the inseparability of thought and action, existentialism is close to ideas of James Dewey and Whitehead.

10 Job and Ecclesiastes, Socrates, Paul, Augustine, Pascal, Shelling, Lessing, Nietzsche, Bergson, William James are most frequently mentioned in this connection.

11 The existentialist makes an all-important distinction—his entire case depends upon it—between emotions or feelings available to psychological ("essential") description, and existential awareness. A standard example is Kierkegaard's contrast of fear and existential dread. Fear is a feeling, has an object, and is psychologically definable. Dread is all-encompassing, has

no object, and manifests the finitude of man. This "depth below the depth" common to all existential writers is held to go beyond the categories of Freud or Alder or Jung. If the distinction fails, then existentialism becomes a form of introspective psychology, and the analyst's dissociation of intellect and feeling becomes the definitive rejection of its claims to ontological knowledge.

12 Hence existentialism is sometimes called a "philosophical anthropology."

13 Cf. Kierkegaard's *Either/or, Stages on Life's Way, Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Also Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* Sec. 62, where merely adjusting and actually choosing are distinguished.

14 The emphasis on the radical discontinuity between human and sub-human and the prominence of "transcendent" elements, set existentialism apart from "naturalism" or "idealism" in many traditional uses of these terms.

15 The phrase "self-creating" is pointed toward Sartre's near-absolute notion of freedom which ascribes complete spontaneity and non-limitation to the "pour soi" or self. This notion is, in several interpretations, self-contradictory and hardly distinguishable from chaos. It is rarely noted, that Berdyaev with mystical roots held a similar view, that freedom is prior to being. (Cf. *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung*, Vol. V, 1, pp. 86 ff.)

The present essay will avoid these extremities.

16 Cf. the second section of Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*.

17 Cf. Sartre's *L'Être et le Néant*, pp. 127-30, 639-642 f. The point is elaborated in Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.

18 Cf. Jaspers, "So far as I choose, I am. If I am not I do not choose." *Philosophie*, Vol. 11, p. 182; Marcell, "I am what I have done." *Être et Avoir*, p. 138; Sartre, "I am my liberty." *L'Être et le Néant*, p. 127-30.

19 Cf. Marcel, "Today no attempt is made to use language as a means of contemplating being, language being substituted for being . . . . This concentrating upon words for their own sake is the outcome of a convulsive endeavor to discover form in cultural chaos." *Man in the Modern Age*, pp. 134-5. Cf. *Man Against Mass Society*.

20 But it is not subjective enough. At the depth-level "subjectivity is truth" (Cf. Kierkegaard). But to be swayed by the fleeting and less intimate aspects "of the subjective" is to violate the depth-self and flee the actual.

21 Cf. Kierkegaard's protest, "How are the sciences to help? Simply not at all, in no way whatsoever. They reduce everything to calm and objective observation — with the result that freedom is an inexplicable something. Scientifically Spinoza is the only one who is consistent." *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Lowrie trans.), p. 121.

22 It is ironical that existentialism, radical in its attack on Hegelian rationalism (which has often meant on reason itself) and Cartesian mathematical method and theoretical concepts, should be remarkably accomplished on both counts. Rarely have the resources of reason or human expression been more effectually used. Articulate, if sometimes vague, the movement thus uses with unsurpassed mastery the very tools it condemns; but not in the fashion of the mathematical logician.

23 Symptomatic of the trend is the volume *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (eds. Flew and MacIntyre, New York, Macmillan, 1955). Here British analysts take up with seriousness several existential issues, and such writers as Otto and Wittgenstein, Bultmann and John Wisdom are consulted and compared on the same page.