

EXISTENTIALISM FROM  
DOSTOEVSKY TO SARTRE



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# EXISTENTIALISM

*From Dostoevsky to Sartre*

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Kaufmann's *Religions in Four Dimensions: Existential and Aesthetic, Historical and Comparative* (1976) includes over 250 of his photographs, 185 of them in color. His *Cain and Other Poems: Enlarged Edition*, *The Faith of a Heretic*, and *Existentialism, Religion, and Death* are Meridian books.

# EXISTENTIALISM

*From Dostoevsky to Sartre*

REVISED AND EXPANDED



EDITED, WITH AN INTRODUCTION,  
PREFACES, AND NEW TRANSLATIONS

by

Walter Kaufmann



A MERIDIAN BOOK

**NEW AMERICAN LIBRARY**

**TIMES MIRROR**

NEW YORK, LONDON AND SCARBOROUGH, ONTARIO

# To Felix

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 56-10018



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**The New American Library, Inc.,**

**1301 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10019,**  
*in Canada* by **The New American Library of Canada Limited,**

**81 Mack Avenue, Scarborough, Ontario M1L 1M8,**  
*in the United Kingdom* by **The New English Library Limited,**  
**Barnard's Inn, Holborn, London, E.C. 1, England.**

**First Printing/ World Publishing Company, September, 1956**

**First Printing, Expanded Edition/ New American Library, March, 1975**

**3 4 5 6 7 8 9**

**PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**



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## *Preface to the Expanded Edition*

All of the old selections are still here, and so is the introductory essay, except for some small revisions on page 42. But I have added many new selections. The only new author is *Ortega y Gasset*. This short chapter shows clearly how he stated some of Sartre's best-known ideas years before Sartre. His relation to Heidegger is discussed in the preface to the Ortega chapter.

The *Kierkegaard* chapter has been strengthened by the inclusion of three additional selections: "Dread and Freedom," "Authority," and "Truth is Subjectivity." The *Heidegger* chapter now contains two new essays, both complete: "My Way to Phenomenology," which is easier to read than anything else Heidegger has ever published and throws a great deal of light on him, and "What is Metaphysics?" which has long been acknowledged to be one of his most important publications.

Finally, the greatest event in the history of existentialism since the original edition of this book appeared was Sartre's embrace of Marxism, and a selection from his essay "Marxism and Existentialism," in which he defined his position, now concludes the Sartre chapter. In sum, there are seven new selections that should greatly add to the usefulness of this book.

W. K.

## *Preface*

Some anthologies treat great literature and philosophy as if they could be used to furnish a cultural supermarket where the reader shops around. Of course, it is the reader's right to browse, to skip, and not to read, whether a volume is by a single author or by ten. What matters is that a book should offer, when read straight through, more than the sum of the parts. The present volume is intended to tell a story, and the growing variations of some major themes, the echoes, and the contrasts ought to add not only to the enjoyment but also to the reader's understanding.

There are several new translations made especially for this book. Jaspers' essay "On My Philosophy" has been translated by Felix Kaufmann, and I myself have translated the material from Nietzsche, Rilke, and Heidegger.

I am deeply indebted to Princeton University for a year's leave of absence and to the Fulbright Commission for a research grant which enabled me, among other things, to listen to lectures by Jaspers and Heidegger and to talk with them and many of their colleagues and former students. To Heidegger I am also indebted for answering, orally and in writing, questions about his essay which is here offered in English for the first time.

My wife, Hazel Kaufmann, has given me invaluable aid and comfort.

W. K.

## *Kaufmann: Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*

Existentialism is not a philosophy but a label for several widely different revolts against traditional philosophy. Most of the living "existentialists" have repudiated this label, and a bewildered outsider might well conclude that the only thing they have in common is a marked aversion for each other. To add to the confusion, many writers of the past have frequently been hailed as members of this movement, and it is extremely doubtful whether they would have appreciated the company to which they are consigned. In view of this, it might be argued that the label "existentialism" ought to be abandoned altogether.

Certainly, existentialism is not a school of thought nor reducible to any set of tenets. The three writers who appear invariably on every list of "existentialists"—Jaspers, Heidegger, and Sartre—are not in agreement on essentials. Such alleged precursors as Pascal and Kierkegaard differed from all three men by being dedicated Christians; and Pascal was a Catholic of sorts while Kierkegaard was a Protestant's Protestant. If, as is often done, Nietzsche and Dostoevsky are included in the fold, we must make room for an impassioned anti-Christian and an even more fanatical Greek-Orthodox Russian imperialist. By the time we consider adding Rilke, Kafka, and Camus, it becomes plain that one essential feature shared by all these men is their perfervid individualism.

The refusal to belong to any school of thought, the repudiation of the adequacy of any body of beliefs whatever, and especially of systems, and a marked dissatisfaction with traditional philosophy as superficial, academic, and remote from life—that is the heart of existentialism.

Existentialism is a timeless sensibility that can be discerned here and there in the past; but it is only in recent times that it has hardened into a sustained protest and preoccupation.

It may be best to begin with the story of existentialism before attempting further generalizations. An effort to tell this story with a positivist's penchant for particulars and a relentless effort to suppress one's individuality would only show that existentialism is completely uncongenial to the writer. This is not meant to be a defense of arbitrariness. A personal perspective may suggest one way of ordering diffuse materials, and be fruitful, if only by way of leading others to considered dissent.

## I. DOSTOEVSKY

In some of the earliest philosophers, such as Pythagoras and Heraclitus and Empedocles, we sense a striking unity of life and thought; and after the generation of the Sophists, Socrates is said to have brought philosophy down to earth again. In the Socratic schools and in Stoicism a little later, philosophy is above all a way of life. Throughout the history of philosophy other, more or less similar, examples come to mind, most notably Spinoza. It is easy, and it was long fashionable, to overestimate the beautiful serenity of men like these, and it is well to recall the vitriolic barbs of Heraclitus, the inimitable sarcasm of Socrates, and the passions of Spinoza. Even so, it is an altogether new voice that we hear in Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*.

The pitch is new, the strained protest, the self-preoccupation. To note a lack of serenity would be ridiculous: poise does not even remain as a norm, not even as an element of contrast; it gives way to poses, masks—the drama of the mind that is sufficient to itself, yet conscious of its every weakness and determined to exploit it. What we perceive is an unheard-of song of songs on individuality: not classical, not Biblical, and not at all romantic. No, individuality is not retouched, idealized, or holy; it is wretched and revolting, and yet, for all its misery, the highest good.

The bias against science may remind us of romanticism;

but the *Notes from Underground* are deeply unromantic. Nothing could be further from that softening of the contours which distinguished all romantics from the first attack on classicism to Novalis, Keats, and Wordsworth. Romanticism is flight from the present, whether into the past, the future, or another world, dreams, or, most often, a vague fog. It is self-deception. Romanticism yearns for deliverance from the cross of the Here and Now: it is willing to face anything but the facts.

The atmosphere of Dostoevsky's *Notes* is not one of soft voices and dim lights: the voice could not be shriller, the light not more glaring. No prize, however great, can justify an ounce of self-deception or a small departure from the ugly facts. And yet this is not literary naturalism with its infatuation with material circumstances: it is man's inner life, his moods, anxieties, and his decisions, that are moved into the center until, as it were, no scenery at all remains. This book, published in 1864, is one of the most revolutionary and original works of world literature.

If we look for anything remotely similar in the long past of European literature, we do not find it in philosophy but, most nearly, in such Christian writers as Augustine and Pascal. Surely, the differences are far more striking even here than any similarity; but it is in Christianity, against the background of belief in original sin, that we first find this wallowing in man's depravity and this uncompromising concentration on the dark side of man's inner life.

In Rousseau's *Confessions*, too, his Calvinistic background has to be recalled; but he turned against it and denied original sin, affirmed the natural goodness of man, and blamed his depravity on society. Then he proceeded to explain how all depravity could be abolished in the good society, ruled by the general will. In Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* no good society can rid man of depravity: the book is among other things an inspired polemic against Rousseau and the whole tradition of social philosophy from Plato and Aristotle through Hobbes and Locke to Bentham, Hegel, and John Stuart Mill. The man whom Dostoevsky has created in this book holds out for what traditional Christianity has called depravity; but he believes neither in original sin nor in God, and for him man's self-will is not depravity: it is only perverse from the point of view of rationalists and others who value neat schemes above the rich texture of individuality.

Dostoevsky himself was a Christian, to be sure, and for that matter also a rabid anti-Semite, anti-Catholic, and anti-Western Russian nationalist. We have no right whatsoever to attribute to him the opinions of all of his most interesting characters. Unfortunately, most readers fail to distinguish between Dostoevsky's views and those of the Grand Inquisitor in Ivan's story in *The Brothers Karamazov*, though it is patent that this figure was inspired by the author's hatred of the Church of Rome; and many critics take for Dostoevsky's reasoned judgments the strange views of Kirilov, though he is mad. As a human being, Dostoevsky was as fascinating as any of his characters; but we must not ascribe to him, who after all believed in God, the outlook and ideas of his underground man.

I can see no reason for calling Dostoevsky an existentialist, but I do think that Part One of *Notes from Underground* is the best overture for existentialism ever written. With inimitable vigor and finesse the major themes are stated here that we can recognize when reading all the other so-called existentialists from Kierkegaard to Camus.

## II. KIERKEGAARD

Kierkegaard was dead nine years when *Notes from Underground* was published first in 1864. He had not known of Dostoevsky, nor did Dostoevsky know of him. Nietzsche, on the other hand, read *Notes from Underground* in 1887 and was impressed as rarely in his life; and a year and a half later, toward the end of his career, he heard of Kierkegaard, too late to secure any of his books. Henceforth, the sequence of our major characters is clear. It is only at the beginning, faced with Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky, that we do better to reverse the strict chronology to start with Dostoevsky.

Kierkegaard confronts us as an individual while Dostoevsky offers us a world. Both are infinitely disturbing, but there is an overwhelming vastness about Dostoevsky and a strident narrowness about Kierkegaard. If one comes from Kierkegaard and plunges into Dostoevsky, one is lost like a man brought up in a small room who is suddenly placed in a sailboat in the middle of the ocean. Or you might even think that Dostoevsky had set out deliberately to make fun of Kierkegaard. Those, on the other hand, who listen to the *Notes from Underground* as to an overture, are well prepared when the curtain rises to hear Kierkegaard's account of how

he first became a writer. Even his *Point of View for My Work as an Author* won't be altogether unfamiliar. It is as if Kierkegaard had stepped right out of Dostoevsky's pen.

The underground man pictures the ease of the "crystal palace" as a distant possibility and tells us that some individual would certainly rebel and try to wreck this utterly insufferable comfort. And Kierkegaard, not exiled to Siberia, as Dostoevsky was as a young man, but well-to-do in the clean, wholesome atmosphere of Copenhagen, sees how easy life is being made and resolves "to create difficulties everywhere."

If it is the besetting fault of Dostoevsky criticism that the views and arguments of some of his characters are ascribed, without justification, to the author, the characteristic flaw of the growing literature on Kierkegaard is that the author is forgotten altogether and his works are read impersonally as one might read those of Hegel. Nothing could be less in keeping with the author's own intentions. Hence it is well to begin a study of Kierkegaard with *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*.

How strange Kierkegaard is when he speaks of himself, and how similar to Dostoevsky's underground man—in contents, style, and sensibility! There is something novel about both which may be brought out by a brief contrast with Heinrich Heine. Heine's self-consciousness is almost proverbial and at one time embarrassed romantic readers; but the strain in Heine is due largely to the tension between reverie and reason. Kierkegaard's self-consciousness, like the underground man's, is far more embarrassing because it comes from his humiliating concern with the reactions and the judgments of the very public which he constantly professes to despise. That he was physically misshapen might have remained without effect on his style and thought; but, like the underground man, he was inwardly out of joint—so much so that Heine seems quite healthy by comparison. How fluent is Heine's prose, and how contorted Kierkegaard's! Their love of irony and even vitriol they shared; but Heine's world is relatively neat and clean-cut: even his melancholy seems pleasant compared to Kierkegaard's. They were contemporaries who died within a year, and yet Heine seems almost classical today, and Kierkegaard painfully modern.

Both concerned themselves with Hegel: Heine even knew him personally, while Kierkegaard, a little younger, heard



only the diatribes of the old Schelling after Hegel's death. Heine came to part with Hegel because the philosopher was not liberal enough for him and too authoritarian. For Kierkegaard, Hegel was too rational and liberal. Heine cannot fairly be called a romantic because he steadfastly refused to give up the ideals of the Enlightenment and because he would not curb his piercing critical intelligence to spare a feeling. Kierkegaard escapes classification as a romantic because he, too, rejects the dim twilight of sentiment as well as any lovely synthesis of intellect and feeling, to insist on the absurdity of the beliefs which he accepts.

Dostoevsky is surely one of the giants of world literature; Kierkegaard, one of its greatest oddities: an occasionally brilliant but exasperating stylist, a frequently befuddled thinker, yet a writer who intrigues and fascinates by virtue of his individuality. His own suggestion for his epitaph is unsurpassable: "That Individual."

Kierkegaard not only *was* an individual but tried to introduce the individual into our thinking as a category. In the vast thicket of his unpruned prose it is not easy to discover his importance for philosophy. He was an aggressive thinker, and the main targets of his attacks are Hegel, of whom he lacked any thorough first-hand knowledge, and Christianity as it existed for approximately eighteen centuries, which seems at first glance to have no immediate bearing on philosophy. In fact, Kierkegaard was in revolt against the wisdom of the Greeks: it was the Greek heritage that he attacked both in philosophy and in Christianity.

Owing to the vast prestige of Greek philosophy, which in turn was influenced by a profound respect for mathematics, Western thought has made its calculations, as it were, without the individual. Where something of the sort is recognized at all today, it is customary to blame secularism and to preach a return either to the Middle Ages, as if the individual had been central then, or to Plato's belief in the eternal verities or values. Kierkegaard, however, was an anti-Plato no less than an anti-Hegel, and an anti-Thomas no less than an anti-Copernicus. He sweeps away the whole conception of a cosmos as a mere distraction. "And it came to pass after these things that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, here I am. And he said, Take now thy son, thine only one, Isaac, whom thou lovest." This is for