

## CHAPTER ONE

# EXISTENTIALISM AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF EXISTENCE (1981)

**N**owadays, when existentialism is spoken of in philosophical circles, its meaning is taken for granted. Yet, quite a few different types of things fall under this heading, although they are certainly neither without a common denominator nor lacking an internal coherence. With existentialism one thinks of Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Gabriel Marcel; of Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers; perhaps also of the theologians, Bultman and Guardini. Actually, the word *existentialism* was a French creation. It was introduced by Sartre in the 1940s—during the very period that Paris was occupied by the Germans—as he was developing the philosophy that he later presented in his voluminous book *Being and Nothingness*. He was acting on the stimulus he had received from his studies in Germany during the 1930s. One could say that a special constellation led to his new, productive response—a constellation in which his interest in Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger had been awakened in the same way and at the same time.

But it must be made clear that the German stimulus standing behind this, which is mainly associated with Heidegger's name, was in essence completely different from that which Sartre himself had produced from it. At that time one referred to such things in

Germany with the expression *philosophy of existence*, and the word *existential* was quite in vogue during the late 1920s. If it was not "existential," it simply did not count. It was primarily Heidegger and Jaspers who were known as the representatives of this movement, although neither of them met this characterization with real conviction or approval. After the war, Heidegger delivered a thorough and well-founded rejection of the Sartrean brand of existentialism in the well-known "Letter on Humanism"; and in the middle of the 1930s, after observing the devastating consequences of the uncontrolled existential emotionalism that had strayed into the mass hysteria of the National Socialist movement, the horrified Jaspers hurriedly moved the concept of "the existential" back to its secondary position and return reason to a position of primacy. *Reason and Existence* was one of the most beautiful and effective publications of Jaspers to come out of the 1930s. In this work he made an appeal to the exceptional cases of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche and sketched out his theory of the "encompassing," which incorporated both reason and existence. What bestowed the word *existence* with such power then? Certainly not the usual, normal grade-school use of the word, meaning "to exist," "existent," or "existence," as it would be found in phrases such as *the question of the existence of God* or *the existence of the external world*. No, a special expression lent the word *existence* its then-new conceptual character. This took shape under some specific conditions that need to be brought into view. The use of the word in this new, emphatic sense can be traced back to the Danish writer and thinker Søren Kierkegaard. He wrote in the 1840s, but his effect on the world and especially on Germany was not felt until the beginning of this century. A Swabian minister by the name of Christoph Schrempf arranged a translation of the complete works of Kierkegaard with Diederichs. The translation had a somewhat loose style but was exceptionally readable. As this translation became well known, it contributed a great deal to the movement that was later given the name the *philosophy of existence*.

Kierkegaard's own situation in the 1840s was determined by his critique of Hegelian speculative idealism, a critique motivated by his Christian faith. It was out of this context that the word *existence* gained its specific *pathos*.<sup>3</sup> Schelling's thought had already brought a new element to bear on the matter when, in his profound speculations about the relationship of God to his creation, he postulated a

distinction within God himself. He spoke of the foundation in God and of the existence in God, which in turn allowed for the discovery that freedom was firmly rooted in the Absolute and provided for a deeper understanding of the nature of human freedom. Kierkegaard picked up this thought-motif of Schelling's, and he transplanted it into the polemical context of his critique of Hegel's speculative dialectic, a dialectic in which all is mediated and united in syntheses.

But what presented a particular challenge to Christianity—and especially to the Protestant church—was Hegel's claim to have raised the truth of Christianity to the level of an intellectual concept and to have completely reconciled faith and knowledge to one another. This challenge was taken up on many sides. Feuerbach, Ruge, Bruno Bauer, David Friedrich Strauss, and finally, Marx come to mind. But it was Kierkegaard who, driven by his own religious distress, had the deepest insight into the paradox of faith. His famous first work had the challenging title *Either/Or*. It programmatically expressed what was lacking in Hegel's speculative dialectic: the decision between "either/or," upon which human existence—and Christian existence in particular—is actually based. Nowadays one uses the word *existence* spontaneously in such contexts—as I just did—with an emphasis that translocates it completely from its scholastic origins. This usage can certainly be found in other expressions, such as in the phrase *the struggle for existence*—in which we are all engaged—or when one says, "my existence depends on it." These are phrases with a special emphasis, yet one that certainly reminds us more of the religion of hard cash [*harte Taler*] than the fear and trembling of the Christian heart. But when someone like Kierkegaard says of Hegel, the most famous philosopher of his time, that the absolute professor in Berlin has forgotten "to exist" [*das Existieren*], one finds in this sarcastic polemic a clear and emphatic reference to the basic human situation of choosing and deciding—one whose Christian and religious gravity cannot be muddled or played down by reflection and dialectical mediation.

How is it that this critique of Hegel, which came out of the first half of the nineteenth century, was instilled with new life in our century? To grasp this one must visualize the catastrophe of World War I and what its outbreak and development meant to the cultural consciousness of European humanity. The bourgeois society, spoiled by the long period of peace, had developed a belief in progress and a

cultural optimism that came to characterize the liberal age. All of this collapsed in the storm of the war, which in the end was completely different from all those that had preceded it. The course of the war was not decided by personal courage or military genius but, rather, by the outcome of the competition between the heavy industries of all the different countries. The horror of matériel battles [*Materialschlachten*], in which innocent nature, fields and woods, villages and cities were devastated, in the end left those in the trenches and dug-outs with no room for any thought except "one day, when everything is over," as Carl Zuckmayer had expressed it then.

The extent of this insanity outstripped the youth's powers of comprehension. They had come to the struggle with an idealistic enthusiasm and a willingness to make sacrifices, but it soon became clear to the youth on all sides that the old forms of chivalrous—if often cruel and bloody—honor had lost their place. What remained was a nonsensical and unreal event—one that was also founded on the unreality of the overheated nationalism that had in turn caused the workers' movement, the internationale, to explode. It was no wonder that the intellectual leaders of that time asked, "What has gone astray with our belief in science, with our belief that the world was being made a more humane place and that its safety was being insured by the increasing amount of regulation? What had gone astray with the presumed development of society towards progress and freedom?"

It is obvious that the profound cultural crisis that came over the whole European culture at that time would have to express itself philosophically, and it is just as obvious that this would be especially pronounced in Germany, whose radical transformation and collapse was the most visible and catastrophic expression of the general absurdity. The critique of the reigning educational idealism [*Bildungsidealismus*], which was supported primarily by the continuing presence of Kantian philosophy in academia, pervaded during these years and stripped academic philosophy as a whole of its credibility. A consciousness of this complete lack of orientation filled the spiritual situation of 1918, a situation into which I myself had begun to peer.

One can imagine how the two men, Jaspers and Heidegger, first encountered and approached one another when they first met in Freiburg in 1920. That meeting was occasioned by the sixtieth birthday of the founder of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl. Both viewed

from a critical distance the academic hustle and bustle and the academic style of affected behavior. A philosophical friendship was founded then—or was it an attempt at a friendship that was never a complete success? It was motivated by a shared resistance to the old and a common will to new, radical forms of thinking. Jaspers had just begun to mark out his own philosophical position. In *The Psychology of World Views*, he devoted a lot of space to Kierkegaard (among others). Heidegger pounced upon Jaspers with his own peculiar form of sinister energy—and simultaneously radicalized him. He wrote a long, critical exposé of Jaspers's *The Psychology of World Views*, in which he followed Jaspers's thought to its bold and extreme consequences. This critique remained unpublished at that time, but it has since been published.

In the aforementioned book Jaspers analyzes the different world-views of representative figures [*Gestalten*]. His intention was to show how the different ways of thinking are played out in the praxis of life, because even world-views extend beyond the binding generalities of the scientific orientation to the world. World-views are dispositions of the will that rest, as we now say, upon “existential decisions.” Jaspers described what all of the different forms of existence that can be differentiated in this way have in common with the concept of boundary situation [*Grenzsituation*]. By boundary situations he meant such situations whose boundary character demonstrated the limits of scientific mastery of the world. One such boundary situation is the appearance of something that no longer can be conceived of as just another example of a general rule and, hence, a case where one can no longer rely on the scientific control of calculable processes. Some examples of such a situation would be death, which we all must face; guilt, which everyone must carry; or the whole formation of a person's life, in which each of us as an individual—that one and only individual—must come to realize himself or herself. It is meaningful to say that it is precisely in these boundary situations where what one is first really emerges. This emerging, this stepping out of the controllable, calculable reactions and ways of behaving of social beings, constitutes the concept of existence.

Jaspers had stumbled upon the thematization of the boundary situation in his critical appropriation of science and in his recognition of its limits. He had the good fortune of being in the proximity

of Max Weber, a figure of truly giant scientific stature whom he admired and followed, although ultimately with critical and self-critical questions. This great sociologist and polyhistorian represented, not only for Jaspers but also for my own generation, the grandeur and complete absurdity of the internal asceticism of the modern scientist. His incorruptible scientific conscience and his passionate impetus compelled him to a downright quixotic self-restriction. This consisted of the fact that he detached completely from the scientific, objective realm of knowledge the living, acting human beings, the very human beings who were confronted by these ultimate decisions; but at the same time he gave them the duty to know, that is, they were to pledge themselves to an "ethics of responsibility." Max Weber became the advocate, founder, and harbinger of a value-free sociology. But this did not mean at all that a colorless and bloodless scholar pushed his spiel about methodology and objectification but that this was a man of powerful temperament whose boundless political and moral passion demanded of himself and others such self-restriction. In the eyes of this great researcher, to go so far as to make armchair prophecies was absolutely the worst thing one could do. However, Max Weber was not only a model for Jaspers; he also served as a counterexample that led Jaspers to explore more deeply the limits of the scientific orientation to the world and to develop, if I might say so, a version of reason that transcends these limits. That which he presented in his *Psychology of World Views* and later in his three-volume magnum opus, *Philosophy*, was—even if directed by his personal passions—an impressive philosophical recapitulation and conceptual unfurling of the negative and positive <elements> aroused by the gigantic figure of Max Weber. He was constantly dogged by the question of how the incorruptible purity of scientific research, on the one hand, and the imperturbability of the will and feelings that he encountered in the existential weight of this man, on the other hand, could be grasped and gauged within the medium of thought.

Heidegger started from completely different assumptions. Unlike Jaspers, he had not been educated in the spirit of the natural sciences and medicine. Although one would generally not have guessed it, his genius had allowed him to keep up with academic developments in the natural sciences as a young man. The minor subjects that he chose in his examination for his doctorate were mathematics and physics! But his real focus lay elsewhere—in the

historical world. Above all, the history of theology, which he had intensively pursued, and philosophy and its history captured his interest. He had been a student of the neo-Kantians Heinrich Rickert and Emil Lask. Then he found himself under the influence of the masterful art of phenomenological description, and he took as his model the superb analytical technique and the concrete, factual approach [*Sachblick*] of his master, Edmund Husserl. But beyond this, he had been schooled by yet another master—Aristotle. He had become familiar with Aristotle quite early on, but as one would expect, the modern interpretation of Aristotle that had served as his introduction quickly began to appear questionable to him. This interpretation had been rendered by Catholic neo-Scholasticism, and on the basis of his own religious and philosophical questions, it appeared inappropriate to the subject matter. So, he attended school with Aristotle once again—this time alone—and gained for himself an immediate, living understanding of the beginnings of Greek thinking and questioning, an understanding that transcended all mere erudition, was immediately evident, and possessed the compelling power of the simple. In addition, this young man, who at this time was slowly freeing himself from and extending himself beyond his own narrow regional environment, found himself confronted by a new climate: The rages of World War I ushered in a new spirit that demanded expression everywhere. The currents of Bergson, Simmel, Dilthey, maybe not Nietzsche directly but certainly philosophy beyond the scientific orientation of neo-Kantianism flowed in on him, and so, with all of the qualifications of the inherited and acquired erudition and with an innate, deep passion for questioning, he became the authentic spokesman of the new thinking taking shape in the field of philosophy.

Certainly Heidegger was not alone. This reaction to the disappearing educational idealism of the era preceding the war revealed itself in many fields. One thinks of the dialectical theology, which in Karl Barth raised the talk of God to a new problem and with Franz Overbeck threw out the calm balance that had been established between Christian proclamation and historical research—a balance represented by liberal theology. And one thinks in general of the critique of idealism connected with the rediscovery of Kierkegaard.

But there were still other crises in the life of science and culture that could be felt everywhere. I remember that van Gogh's correspondence was published at that time and that Heidegger loved

quotations from him. The appropriation of Dostoyevsky also played an immense role at this time. The radicality of this portrayal of human beings, the passionate questioning of society and progress, the intensive fashioning and suggestive conjuring up of human obsessions and labyrinths of the soul—one could continue endlessly. It is easy to see how the philosophical thought that was compressed into the concept of existence was the expression of a newly released, very prevalent *Dasein*-emotion. One recalls the then-contemporary poetry, the expressionistic stammering of words, or perhaps the bold beginnings of modern painting, all of which demanded a response. One thinks of the virtually revolutionary effect that Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* had on everyone's souls. So it was in the air and Heidegger was uttering the word of the hour when he, in a radicalization of Jaspers's thought, characterized human existence as such by way of a reference to the notion of a boundary situation and brought it newly in view.

Actually, they approached the feeling of existence of those years from two completely different points of departure and with two completely different thought impulses, when Jaspers, on the one hand, and Heidegger, on the other, elevated this feeling to the level of a philosophical concept. Jaspers was a psychiatrist and apparently an astonishing, wide-ranging reader. When I first came to Heidelberg as a follower of Jaspers, someone showed me the bench in the Koestersschen Bookstore where Jaspers sat for exactly three hours every Friday morning and had all of the new releases laid out before him. And without exception he ordered a large package of books to be delivered to his house every week. With the self-confidence of an important spirit and the posture of a schooled, critical observer, he was able to find nourishment in any of the diverse areas of scientific research that had some import for philosophy. He was able to mesh a conscience or, better, the conscientiousness of his own thought with the awareness of his own participation in the actual research. This gave him the insight that scientific research meets up with insurmountable boundaries when it encounters the individuality of existence and the obligatoriness of its decisions.

Thus, in essence Jaspers reestablished in the context of our time the old Kantian distinction that critically marked the boundaries of theoretical reason, and he refounded in practical reason and its implications the actual realm of philosophical and metaphysical truths. By making an appeal for the grand tradition of occidental history, its



metaphysics, its art and religion, in which human existence became aware of its own finitude, its release into boundary situations, and its surrender to its own existential decisions, Jaspers made metaphysics possible once again. In the three lengthy volumes of his *Philosophy*, the “World Orientation,” “Existential Elucidation,” and “Metaphysics,” he circumscribed the entire area of philosophy in meditations possessing a uniquely personal tone and stylistic elegance. One of his chapter headings reads “The Law of the Day and the Passion for the Night”—those are sounds that one was not accustomed to hearing from the philosophical lectern in the era of epistemology. And Jaspers’s comprehensive picture of the situation in 1930, which was presented in *Die geistige Situation der Zeit [Man in the Modern Age]* as the thousandth small volume from the Göschen Press, was also impressive because of its terseness and powerful observations. In those days, when I myself was still a student, it was said of Jaspers that he had a superiority that reigned supreme when it came to leading discussions. By contrast, his style of lecturing sounded like noncommittal chatter or a casual talk with an anonymous companion. Later, when he moved to Basel after the war, he constantly followed contemporary events with the attitude of the moralist. He frequently made an existential appeal to the public consciousness and argued philosophically for positions on such controversial issues as collective guilt or the atom bomb. His thinking always seemed to transpose the most personal experiences into the communicative scene.

The young Heidegger’s appearance and bearing was completely different: A dramatic entrance, a diction with great force, the focus with which he lectured—he cast a spell over the entire audience. The intention of this teacher of philosophy was in no way to make a moralistic appeal to the authenticity of existence. He certainly took part in such an appeal, and a good deal of his almost magical effect came from his natural gift to radiate such an appeal from his very being as well as in his lectures. But his real intention was a different one. How should I say it? His philosophical questioning was undoubtedly motivated by a desire to clarify the deep disquiet that had been aroused by his own religious calling and by his dissatisfaction with the then-contemporary theology and philosophy. From early on Heidegger strove toward a completely different, radical commitment for thinking, a commitment for thinking that referenced existence, and this gave him his revolutionary force. The question that so moved him and to which he brought the entirety of

the troubled self-esteem of those years was the oldest and first question of metaphysics: the question of Being. He asked how a finite, frail human Dasein—one whose death is certain—could understand itself in its Being in spite of its temporality; indeed, how it could experience Being, not as a privation, as a defect, or as a merely fleeing pilgrimage of earthlings journeying through this life toward a participation in the eternity of the divine, but rather as the distinguishing feature of being human. It is astonishing how this fundamental intention of Heidegger's questioning, which presupposed a constant dialogue with metaphysics and with the thinking of the Greeks, as well as with the thinking of St. Thomas, Leibniz, Kant, and Hegel, was completely missed at first by many contemporaries who shared Heidegger's philosophical interest.

The friendship that had begun to form between Heidegger and Jaspers was certainly based primarily upon their common rejection of the settled academic teaching, upon the bustle of "idle talk," and upon the anonymity of its responsibility. As both began to articulate their own thinking more clearly, the tensions between Jaspers's personalized manner of thinking and that of Heidegger, who devoted himself completely to his mission for thinking, to the "matter" for thinking, began to show themselves in an ever-sharper form. Jaspers often employed the critical expression *encasement* [*Gehäuse*] in reference to all didactically hardened thought, and he did not hesitate to use this against Heidegger's effort to revive the question of Being. In spite of this, Jaspers wrestled during his whole life with the challenge that Heidegger presented to him. This has just recently been impressively documented by the publication of Jaspers's notes on Heidegger.

However, it is correct that *Being and Time*, Heidegger's great firstborn, presented two very different aspects. What brought about its revolutionary effect was the temporally critical timber and the existential engagement, which were expressed in a vocabulary emulating Kierkegaard's. On the other hand, Heidegger leaned so heavily on Husserl's phenomenological idealism that Jaspers's resistance is understandable. But as Heidegger pursued his way of thinking, he was truly led beyond any dogmatic "encasement." He had himself spoken of the "turn" [*Kehre*] that befell his thinking, and in fact his thinking shattered all academic standards because he attempted to find a new language for his thought as he pursued the theme of art, the Hölderlin interpretations, and the extreme thought of Friedrich

Nietzsche. He never claimed to espouse a new doctrine. When the large edition of his writings, the one that followed his own arrangement, began to appear, he gave it the following epigraph: "Ways, not works"; and his later works did in fact always present new ways and new thought experiments.<sup>b</sup> He began working on these ways years before his political involvement, and after the short episode of his political blunder, he continued without a visible break in the direction he had already begun.

Of course, the most astonishing aspect of Heidegger's great effect was that in the 1920s and early 1930s, before he fell into political disfavor, he was able to generate such an unheard-of enthusiasm among his auditors and readers and that, after the war, he was able to regain that effect. This took place after a period of relative seclusion. He was unable to publish during the war because, after he had fallen into political disfavor, no one would give him any paper. After the war he could not teach because he had been suspended due to his involvement as a former Nazi chancellor. But, in spite of all this, he developed an almost overpowering presence during the postwar period when the German material and spiritual life was being reconstructed. He did not do this as a teacher; he spoke only rarely before students. But he entranced an entire generation with his lectures and publications. It was almost life threatening—and presented the organizer with nearly unsolvable problems—when Heidegger would announce one of his cryptic lectures. No lecture hall was large enough during the 1950s. The excitement that emanated from his thinking was picked up by everyone, even by those who did not understand him. One could no longer call what he was voicing in the profundity of his later speculations and in the solemn pathos of his interpretations of poetry (Hölderlin, George, Rilke, Trakl, and so on) *philosophy of existence*. The previously mentioned "Letter on Humanism" was a formal rejection of the irrationalism of the pathos of existence [*Existenzpathos*], which had earlier accompanied the dramatic effect of his thinking but which was never his actual aim. What he saw at work in French existentialism was very distant from his thinking. The "Letter on Humanism" addresses that in very clear language. It was the theme of ethics that the French readers missed in Heidegger—as did Jaspers as well. Heidegger defended himself against this expectation and demand, not because he underestimated the question of ethics or the social plight of Dasein, but rather because his mission

in thinking compelled him to ask more radical questions. "For some time we have not considered the nature of action decisively enough" reads the first sentence of the "Letter on Humanism," and it becomes clear what this sentence, written in an age of social utilitarianism and completely "beyond good and evil," means: The task of thinking cannot be to run along behind self-dissolving ties and self-weakening solidarities and hold up the admonishing finger of the dogmatist. Rather, the task was much more to think about what lies at the bottom of this disintegration that has been brought about by the industrial revolution and to call thinking back to itself, thinking that had otherwise been reduced to calculating and producing.

It is the same with the alleged inattention to the social problems of the "we," which is known in philosophy as the problem of intersubjectivity: Heidegger first displayed in his ontological critique the prejudices contained the concept of the subject, and therewith he incorporated into his thought the critique of consciousness practiced by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. This means, however, that *Dasein* and "Being-with" [*Mit-Sein*] are equally primordial, and "Being-with" does not signify the being together of two subjects. Rather, "Being-with" is a primordial mode of "Being-we"—a mode in which the I is not supplemented by a you; instead, it encompasses a primary commonality that cannot be reached by the Hegelian thought of "Spirit." "Only a god can save us."

We ask in closing, what in the thinking of these men is still alive and what is dead? This is a question that every present must put to the voices of its past. It is true that since the 1960s a new mood has entered the spiritual life. The mood of the younger generations is characterized by a new feeling of disenchantment, a new inclination toward technical certainty and control and an avoidance of risks and uncertainties. The pathos of "existence" sounds as strange to these people as the pathos of the great poetic gestures of Hölderlin and Rilke, and the figures who presented us with the so-called philosophy of existence are today almost completely dormant. The fine structure of the movement of Jaspers's reflection with its intense personal pathos will scarcely be able to have an effect in the age of mass existence and emotional solidarity. Heidegger, on the other hand, remains surprisingly present in spite of all this. Indeed, for the most part he is rejected with an haughty air—or celebrated in an almost ritualistic recapitulation. Both responses go to show that one cannot

easily get around him. It is not so much the pathos of existence found in his beginnings that allows him to maintain his presence as it is the unflagging perseverance with which a natural genius in thinking pursued his own religious and philosophical questions—his own expressive gestures often pushed to the point of unintelligibility and yet maintaining the unmistakable signet of a genuine perplexity in thinking. One must think in global terms if one wants to properly grasp Heidegger's presence. Whether in America or the Far East, whether in India, Africa, or in Latin America—the impetus for thinking that emanated from him is to be found everywhere. The global destiny that mechanization and industrialization holds has found its thinker in Heidegger, but at the same time, the multiplicity and multivocality of the human legacy has won through him a new presence, one that will be brought into the world conversation of the future.

So one can say in closing, the greatness of spiritual figures can be measured by their ability to overcome, by virtue of what they have to say, the stylistic resistance and stylistic distance that separates them from the present. Not the philosophy of existence, but the men who have gone through this phase of existential and philosophical pathos and then proceeded beyond it belong among the philosophical partners in a philosophical conversation that is not only of yesterday; it will continue through tomorrow and the days after.