

PHILOSOPHIES OF EXISTENCE

An Introduction to the Basic Thought
of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Jaspers,
Marcel, Sartre

Jean Wahl

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Volume 6

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Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Jaspers, Marcel, Sartre

by

JEAN WAHL

translated from the French by

F. M. LORY



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Foreword

THE philosophies of existence are no doubt of very ancient origin. They go back to Socrates, refusing to separate his thought from his life, Plato, refusing to separate Socrates' death from his thought, the prophets, answering the call of God, Job, calling out to God—not to mention all the philosophers whose thought and existence have been intimately united: Nietzsche, for example, or William James, Lequier, Maine de Biran, or Amiel—even Hegel or Renouvier. But the fact remains that it was only in the XIXth century that certain philosophies began calling themselves 'philosophies of existence', wishing thereby to distinguish themselves from other philosophies, if not in their origin, at least in their structure and approach.

It is with that structure, it is with the categories of the philosophy of existence that we are concerned in this book. We have attempted to show their basic articulations, their essential moments.

It is hoped that a study of these categories—in spite of the dryness at times of their nomenclature—will lead the reader to reflect on his own existence. It is hoped, too, that he will see in these philosophies neither something totally new nor the restatement of old ideas, but primarily a call to his own subjectivity and perhaps the transition towards a new mode of thought that will combine sharpened subjectivity with a deep sense of communion with others and with the world.



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Part One



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I

Generalities

IN approaching the philosophies of existence¹ we are faced with a certain number of difficulties. The first arises from the extreme diversity of the various philosophical positions designated by that name.

The philosophy of existence springs from the essentially religious meditations of Kierkegaard. And today when this

¹ We prefer the name, *philosophy of existence*, to the name, *existentialism*, for the reason that several of the most important philosophers that we shall discuss—Heidegger and Jaspers in particular—refuse to be called existentialists.

Heidegger in several lectures has spoken out against a doctrine he calls existentialism, and Jaspers has said that existentialism is the death of the philosophy of existence. They have done so because in existentialism they see a doctrine and they are wary of rounded doctrines.

On the other hand, there are philosophers—Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Simone de Beauvoir—who accept the title of existentialist. Gabriel Marcel also happens to accept occasionally the name of Christian existentialist, and Messrs. Lavelle and Le Senne do not reject the word 'existentialism'.

But if we wish to refer to this philosophy as a whole, the term 'philosophy of existence' is more appropriate. Yet even that term is not wholly satisfactory, for Heidegger would no more be called a philosopher of existence than he would an existentialist. For him the philosophy of existence is mainly the philosophy of Jaspers. As for himself, he believes that the basic problem in philosophy—the one and only problem—is that of Being. And if in *Sein und Zeit* he has taken up the question of existence, it is because he believes that the approach to Being is by way of an inquiry into our own existence. Being, then, is the essential object of all philosophical investigation for Heidegger, and he has sought to be not a philosopher of existence, but a philosopher of Being. Thus we ought to speak of Heidegger neither as an existentialist nor as a philosopher of existence.

For other reasons Kierkegaard, who is the father of all these philosophies, would decline the name of philosopher of existence: he would object not to the word 'existence' but to the word 'philosopher'. He is not a philosopher, he would say; he is a religious man and has no philosophy to call 'philosophy of existence' or to oppose to other philosophies.