Alienation
And All That

MIRRORS OF MAN IN EXISTENTIALISM. By Nathan A. Scott Jr.
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Although the existentialist movement has been officially dead for about fifteen years, its literature still has the capacity to interest students, often overwhelmed by what they believe to be the inescapable dullness of professional, technical philosophy. Existentialism focuses on human existence in its concreteness, in its nauseating fluidity and anguish. As teenagers, the idea that life was so horrible and yet so 'experienced', to do deliciously, held a fascination for us which led to the study of philosophy. However, for most, the philosophy which was taught in universities made no impression on their souls, so they left to study literature or experience more healthier living. The philosophy of the existentialists became mixed up with a general mystique do-your-own-thing, je ne regrette rien attitude which owed more to Baba Ram Das's Be Here Now than to Sartre's classic Being and Nothingness. The slogans of the Paris cafes, the idea that God is dead, that everything is permitted, that man is a 'nucleus passionis', served as neat explanations for frequent insobriety. But that was the extent of it, and existentialism in its popular manifestation mingled with Marxist commitment to humanism and Zen techniques for emptying the heart of attachment and detachment.

But behind this nihilistic though pleasurable Lebensphilosophie stands a more sober and terrifying literature—Kierkegaard's struggles with his unscientific spirit, Nietzsche's attempt at the destruction of all Christian values, Sartre's and Camus's dialogue with despair. The main effect of this literature was to point to the rotten heart of twenty-five centuries of western civilisation, a horrible idling of the machine, which left values as mere empty words and robbed actions of their destiny. Kierkegaard's Conclusion of Unscientific Postscript or Nietzsche's Thus Spoke Zarathustra are as relevant to metaphysics today as they were when they first appeared in the last century. Today, in fact, Nietzsche's star is on a meteoric rise, freed from the ghost of Fascism which his fanatical sister shackled to him. The term 'existentialism' does not adequately contain the varied questions and probes of these writers, and the sooner the term disappears, the better it will be for philosophy. As for the excitement of reading 'about humans', as they actually are, rather than as they are ideologically or drearily supposed to be, that excitement will remain in these books, as it remains in Plato or Augustine, because of the metaphysical depth and sheer literary force of their inquiries.

Secondary literature on the existentialists is another matter. Nathan Scott's book, Mirrors of Man in Existentialism, is yet another contribution to the vast literature on the subject. Like Blackham's Six Existentialist Thinkers (1951), it also chooses six thinkers as epitomising the movement. First, let me say that Nathan Scott adds absolutely nothing new to our knowledge of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Sartre, Camus, Heidegger or Buber. Secondly, he insists in including Heidegger as an existentialist, against that philosopher's own refusal to be part of the movement, and his own assertion that he was being no special interest to him, except as the path to inquire about being-in-general. The book is intended as an introduction to Professor Scott sees everything in a heroes-and-villains atmosphere. Nietzsche's sister, who already had of her brother's notes to appear more racist and anti-Semitic than they were, had a 'shrewish' and 'grasping' nature, according to Scott. While he praises Sartre's and Camus's opposition to Fascism, Scott finds Sartre's interest in Russian Communism a blindness and a 'prejudice'. History is rather too simplified in Professor Scott's analysis.

To the lay person interested in philosophy, this book is an adequate introduction to some exciting thinkers. The reader is greatly aided by the clarity and bright vigour of Scott's prose; he never falls to interest, and his exposition is, except in some small instances, very sound. His outlook sees Existentialism as a religious worldview, even if God is absent or dead. It is a worldview which seeks human value and significance in the brute facts of everyday existence. Man, for Scott, in the modern age is essentially homeless, unable to rest content with himself or his surroundings. Human freedom, instead of giving man hope and power as it did in the Renaissance, now becomes a burden, a strain of empi­ ness which opens up underfoot. Freedom is empty because it is valueless, nameless. The horrors of two world wars have brought this scandal of humanity home to all. One could go on, but the picture is clear enough. Terms like 'alienation', 'chaos', 'solitude', and 'emptiness' now have a more everyday meaning. The philosophy of Existentialism is indeed a nihilistic one, but it is a form of nihilism which gives meaning to existence. This is a point of departure. Scott is able to channel fresh personal meaning into each of these thinkers, and he ends by asserting existentialism as a valid humanist protest in a de-humanised scientific world. Is this true? Is it not just a little too pat? The standard is to answer to the examination question: Discuss the meaning of alienation in the philosophy of the Existentialists. I have always been troubled by the case with which such terms as alienation or empyrean can be thrown about. Safe and secure professors write books about the ultimate meaning of the human condition. Even if the answers are all depressingly vacuous, these people go on acting as if these are answers. In most cases it is the questions which have never been asked.

Kierkegaard, Camus, Sartre, Nietzsche were all rebels and iconoclasts (even if Sartre has been institutionalised in France, his actions were always a mocking of his ideological role). These people are best read on their own; the potted academic versions are as frigid as the academic versions are as frigid as