

been worked out by the melancholy Dane Søren Kierkegaard with variations found in the works of Schelling and Marx. That writers with such diverse philosophical orientations should all have become identified with existentialism is an important indication that existentialism has many forms and that among existentialists there are probably more differences than similarities. Even William James, Bergson, Nietzsche, the German mystic Jacob Böhme, and Pascal must be counted among those who contributed to the existentialist theme. What all these philosophers had in common was a concern about existence, human existence, the conditions and quality of the existing human individual.

Existentialism was bound to happen. The individual had over the centuries been pushed into the background by systems of thought, historical events, and technological forces. The major systems of philosophy had rarely paid attention to the uniquely personal concerns of individuals. Although Aristotle, for example, wrote a major treatise on ethics, Montaigne could say that "I can't recognize most of my daily doings when they appear in Aristotle." Nietzsche also wrote that "to our scholars, strangely enough, the most pressing question does not occur: to what end is their work... useful?" To be sure, Socrates had focused upon just these matters with his insistence that all thought and activity should be directed toward enhancing the meaning of human existence. St. Augustine also engaged in profound introspective psychological analysis to discover the source of human beings' personal insecurity and anxiety. Still, philosophy for the most part dealt with the technical problems of metaphysics, ethics, and the theory of knowledge in a general and objective manner, which bypassed the intimate concerns of people about their personal destiny. Historical events, particularly wars, showed a similar disregard for the feelings and aspirations of individuals. And technology, which arose as an aid to humankind, soon gathered a momentum of its own, forcing people to fit their lives into the rhythm of machines. Everywhere men and women were losing their peculiarly human qualities. They were being converted from "persons" into "pronouns," from "subjects" into "objects," from an "I" into an "it."

Inevitably, dehumanized Western man began to exhibit all the symptoms of his dehumanization. If learning, even philosophy and theology, talked in abstract generalities and skirted around the personal perplexities of individuals, it would be only a question of time before everyone would conclude that there is no expressible meaning for any human being's existence. If wars overwhelmed people in spite of their frantic efforts to forestall such calamities, life would be regarded as precarious, ambiguous, and insecure, and men and women would develop deep anxiety and the feeling of being abandoned in an insensitive and random universe. If technology removed much of the human dimension of existence by harnessing men and women to machines and requiring them to work as "organization people," men would find fewer occasions for expressing their existence as persons.

Religion, the traditional source of human beings' sense of worth, meaning, and moral guidance, was itself suffering from the critical impact of rational and scientific thought. Dostoevsky experimented with the implications of a non-

religious estimate of man, wondering whether one could successfully maintain that "since there is no God, everything is permitted." For Nietzsche, the bankruptcy of religious faith appeared to be the decisive cultural fact of the day. He did not hesitate to proclaim that for all intents and purposes "God is dead." This fact, he urged, should be accepted with courage, and upon it should be built a new conception of human existence. Atheism had become an important cause of the problems that gave rise to existentialism, since the breakdown of the religious tradition of Europe greatly aggravated the growing sense of life's worthlessness and meaninglessness. In their struggle against this meaninglessness, some existentialists took a frankly atheistic position and drew out all the consequences of such a position in formulating their approach to life. Others turned once again to religion in order to rediscover there what they believed had been missed by rational and scientific thinkers.

Whether they were theists or atheists, the existentialists all agreed that traditional philosophy was too academic and remote from life to have any adequate meaning for them. They rejected systematic and schematic thought in favor of a more spontaneous mode of expression in order to capture the authentic concerns of concrete existing individuals. Although there is no "system" of existentialist philosophy, its basic themes can, nevertheless, be discovered in some representative existentialist thinkers.

SÖREN KIERKEGAARD

Many of the themes of contemporary existentialism were first expressed in the writings of Søren Kierkegaard. Born in Copenhagen in 1813, he spent his short life in a brilliant literary career, producing an extraordinary number of books before his death in 1855 at the age of forty-two. Although his books were soon forgotten after his death, they made an enormous impact upon their rediscovery by some German scholars in the early decades of the twentieth century. At the University of Copenhagen Kierkegaard was trained in Hegel's philosophy and was not favorably impressed by it. When he heard Schelling's lectures at Berlin, which were critical of Hegel, Kierkegaard agreed with this attack upon Germany's greatest speculative thinker. "If Hegel had written the whole of his Logic and then said... that it was merely an experiment in thought," wrote Kierkegaard, "then he could certainly have been the greatest thinker who ever lived. As it is, he is merely comic." What made Hegel comic for Kierkegaard was that this great philosopher had tried to capture all of reality in his system of thought and, in the process, had lost the most important element, namely, *existence*. For Kierkegaard, the term *existence* was reserved for the individual human being. To exist, he said, implies being a certain kind of individual, an individual who strives, who considers alternatives, who chooses, who decides, and who, above all, makes a commitment. Virtually none of these acts were implied in Hegel's philosophy. Kierkegaard's whole career might well be considered a self-conscious revolt against abstract thought and an attempt on his part to live up to Feuerbach's admonition: "Do not wish to be a philosopher in

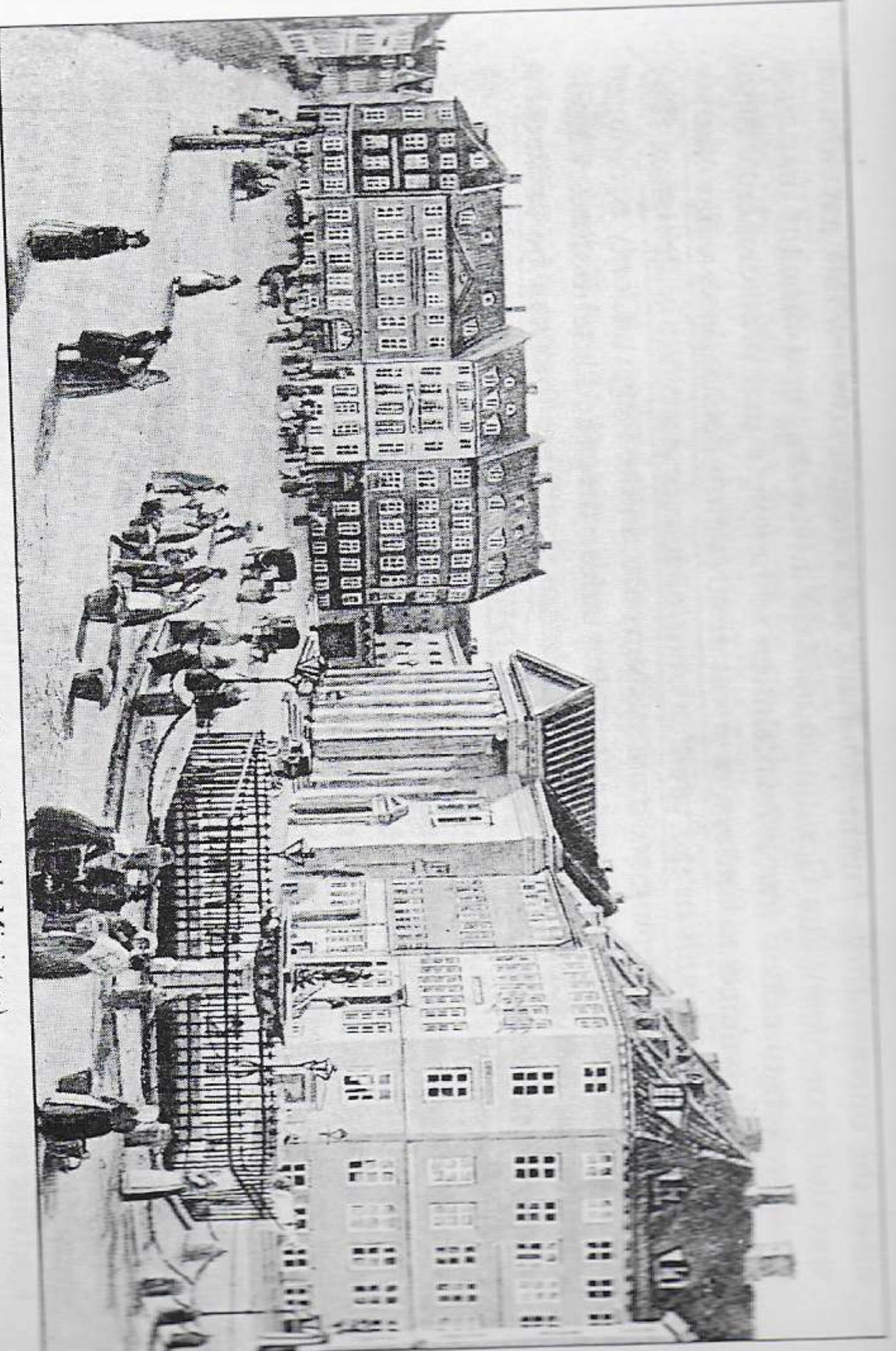


Søren Kierkegaard (Royal Danish Ministry)

contrast to being a man... do not think as a thinker... think as a living, real being ... think in Existence."

What It Means to Think Existentially

To "think in Existence" meant for Kierkegaard to recognize that one is faced with personal choices. Human beings find themselves constantly in an "existential situation." For this reason, their thinking ought to deal with their own personal situation with a view to coming to terms with the problem of alternatives and choices. Hegel's philosophy falsified people's understanding of reality because it shifted attention away from the concrete individual to the concept of universals. It called upon individuals *to think* instead of *to be*, to think the Absolute Thought instead of being involved in decisions and commitments. Kierkegaard made a distinction between the *spectator* and the *actor*, arguing



Kierkegaard House, second from right corner (Royal Danish Ministry)

that only the actor is involved in existence. To be sure, the spectator can be said to exist, but the term *existence* does not properly belong to inert or inactive things, whether these be spectators or stones. Kierkegaard illustrated this distinction by comparing two kinds of men in a wagon, one who holds the reins in his hands but is asleep and the other who is fully awake. In the first case, the horse goes along the familiar road without any direction from the sleeping man, whereas in the other case the man is truly a driver. Surely, in one sense it can be said that both men exist, but Kierkegaard insists that *existence* must refer to a quality in the individual, namely, his conscious participation in an act. Only the conscious driver exists, and so, too, only a person who is engaged in conscious activity of will and choice can be truly said to exist. Thus, while both the spectator and the actor exist in a sense, only the actor is involved in existence.

Kierkegaard's criticism of rational knowledge was severe. He revolved against the rational emphasis in Greek wisdom, which, he charged, had permeated subsequent philosophy and Christian theology. His specific argument was that Greek philosophy had been too greatly influenced by a high regard for mathematics. Although he did not want to reject either mathematics or science in their proper uses, he did reject the assumption that the mode of thought characteristic of science could be successfully employed when trying to understand human nature. Mathematics and science have no place for the human individual, only for the general, the universal. Likewise, Platonic philosophy empha-

sizes the universal, the Form, the True, the Good. Plato's whole assumption was that if one *knew* the Good he would do it. Kierkegaard thought that such an approach to ethics was a falsification of people's real predicament. What Kierkegaard wanted to underscore was that even when a person has knowledge, he or she is still in the predicament of having to make a decision. The grand formulations of philosophical systems are, in the long run, only prolonged detours which eventually come to nothing unless they lead attention back once again to the individual. To be sure, there are problems that can be solved by mathematics and science as well as by ethics and metaphysics. But over against such universal or general problems stands life, each person's life, making demands upon the individual, and at these critical moments general and abstract thought do not help. Kierkegaard saw in the biblical story of Abraham the typical human condition: "God did tempt Abraham and said unto him, Abraham; and he said, here I am. And he said, take now thy son, thine only son, Isaac, whom thou lovest." What kind of knowledge can help Abraham decide whether to obey God, to sacrifice his son? The most poignant moments in life are personal, where the individual becomes aware of himself as a subject. This subjective element is obscured if not denied by rational thought, which considers only man's objective characteristics, those characteristics that *all* men have in common. But subjectivity is what makes up each person's unique existence. For this reason, objectivity cannot give the whole truth about the individual self. That is why rational, mathematical, and scientific thought are incapable of guiding man to genuine existence.

Truth as Subjectivity

Truth, said Kierkegaard, is subjectivity. By this strange notion he meant that for existing, striving, deciding persons there is not available "out there" a prefabricated truth. Anticipating the pragmatic view of William James, who said that "truth is made" by an act of will, Kierkegaard wrote that what is "out there" is "an objective uncertainty"; he argued that "the highest truth attainable for an Existing individual" is simply "an objective uncertainty held fast in the most passionate personal experience...." Whatever may have been his criticism of Plato, he did nevertheless find in Socrates' claim to ignorance a good example of this notion of truth, saying that "the Socratic ignorance which Socrates held fast with the entire passion of his personal experience, was thus an expression of the principle that the eternal truth is related to the Existing individual." This would suggest that the cultivation of the mind is not the only important or decisive thing in life. Of more consequence is the development and maturity of personality.

The Existential Situation

In describing the human *existential situation*, Kierkegaard distinguished between man's present estate, that is, what he now is, and what he ought to be, or what

he is *essentially*. There is, says Kierkegaard, a movement in one's life from one's *essential* to one's *existential condition*, a movement from *essence* to *existence*. The traditional explanation of this movement in theology is made in terms of the doctrine of sin, of the Fall. Kierkegaard translated this doctrine into a profound psychological analysis, in which he isolated people's anxiety over their own finitude as the cause of their estrangement or alienation from their essential being. Sensing their insecurity and finitude, people try to "do something" to overcome their finitude, and invariably what they do only aggravates their problem by adding guilt and despair to their anxiety. Kierkegaard has in mind throughout his analysis the Christian understanding of humankind. Humankind's *essential* nature entails its relation to God, the infinite. Its *existential condition* is a consequence of its alienation from God. If, then, a person's actions drive him or her even further from God, his or her alienation and despair are compounded. This is why it is not of any help to lose oneself in a crowd. Whatever be the nature of a crowd or collectivity, whether rich or poor or political in makeup, or even a congregation in a church—in every case, says Kierkegaard, "a crowd in its very concept is the untruth, by reason of the fact that it renders the individual completely impotent and irresponsible, or at least weakens his sense of responsibility by reducing it to a fraction." Being in a crowd, in short, unmakes one's nature as an individual by diluting the self. From the point of view of Christian faith, being thus immersed in a crowd appears as an attempt upon a person's part to derive some meaning for his or her existence. But this is a wrong attempt, for "to relate oneself to God is a far higher thing than to be related to" any other thing, whether a person, race, or even church. Until one does actualize one's essential self in God, says Kierkegaard, one's life is full of anxiety. One's anxiety is caused by one's awareness, however obscure, of a deep alienation of one's existential from one's essential self. This alienation creates in one a dynamic drive to recover one's essential self. In describing this dynamic movement, Kierkegaard speaks of the "stages on life's way."

The Three Stages

Kierkegaard's analysis of the "three stages" represents a sharp contrast to Hegel's theory of the gradual development of a person's self-consciousness. Whereas Hegel expounded the dialectic movement of the mind as it moves from one stage of intellectual awareness to another through the process of thinking, Kierkegaard described the movement of the self from one level of existence to another through an act of will, an act of choice. Hegel's dialectic moves gradually toward a knowledge of the universal, whereas Kierkegaard's dialectic involves the progressive actualization of the individual. Whereas Hegel overcomes the antithesis by a conceptual act, Kierkegaard overcomes it by the act of personal commitment.

The Aesthetic Stage The first stage in this dialectic process, says Kierkegaard, is the *aesthetic stage*. At this level, a person behaves according to his

impulses and emotions. Although he is not simply sensual at this stage, he is for the most part governed by his senses. For this reason, the aesthetic person knows nothing of any universal moral standards. He has no specific religious belief. His chief motivation is a desire to enjoy the widest variety of pleasures of the senses. His life has no principle of limitation except his own taste; he resents anything that would limit his vast freedom of choice. At this stage an individual can *exist* inasmuch as he deliberately chooses to be an aesthetic person. But even though *existence* can be achieved at this level, Kierkegaard injects the element of *quality* into the matter of existence. Later existentialists were to speak of this quality in terms of *authenticity*. That is, an individual on the aesthetic level is aware, notwithstanding his variety of sense experiences, that his life consists, or *ought* to consist, of more than his emotive and sense experiences.

Kierkegaard distinguishes between our capacity to be *spirit* on the one hand and *sensuousness* on the other, calling the first the *building* and the second the *cellar*. A person, he says, "prefers to dwell in the cellar." To be able to make this distinction about someone else is one thing; but for each individual to have an awareness of these two possibilities within himself or herself is what triggers the dialectic movement in the individual. The antithesis of the sensual drive is the lure of the spirit. In experience, this conflict produces anxiety and despair when the individual discovers that he is in fact living in the "cellar" but that life at this level cannot possibly produce his *authentic* self, cannot result in *true existence*. The individual is now face to face with an *either-or*; either he remains on the aesthetic level with its fatal attractions, whose limitations he knows, or he moves to the next stage. This transition, says Kierkegaard, cannot be made by thinking alone but must be achieved by making a decision, or by an act of will, by a commitment.

The Ethical Stage The second level is the *ethical stage*. Unlike the aesthetic man, who has no universal standards but only his own taste, the ethical man does recognize and accept rules of conduct that reason formulates. Moral rules give the ethical man's life the elements of form and consistency. Moreover, the ethical man accepts the limitations upon his life that moral responsibility imposes. Kierkegaard illustrates the contrast between the aesthetic man and the ethical man in their attitude toward sexual behavior, saying that whereas the former yields to his impulses wherever there is an attraction, the ethical man accepts the obligations of marriage as an expression of reason, the universal reason of man. If Don Juan exemplifies the aesthetic man, it is Socrates who typifies the ethical man or the reign of universal moral law. The ethical man has the mood of moral self-sufficiency; he takes a firm stand on moral questions and, as Socrates argued, assumes that to know the good is to do the good. For the most part, the ethical man considers moral evil to be a product either of ignorance or of weakness of will. But the time comes, says Kierkegaard, when the dialectic process begins to work in the consciousness of the ethical man. He begins to realize that he is involved in something more pro-

found than an inadequate knowledge of the moral law or insufficient strength of will. He is, in short, doing something more serious than merely making mistakes. The ethical man ultimately comes to realize that he is in fact incapable of fulfilling the moral law, that he deliberately violates that law, and therefore he becomes conscious of his guilt. Guilt, or the sense of sin, says Kierkegaard, becomes the dialectic element, the antithesis, that places before man a new *either-or*. Now he must either remain at the ethical level and try to fulfill the moral law, or he must respond to his new awareness, the awareness of his own finitude and estrangement from God to whom he belongs and from whom he must derive his strength. Again, man's movement from the ethical to the next stage cannot be achieved by thinking alone but by an act of commitment, by a *leap* of faith.

The Religious Stage The difference between faith and reason is particularly striking for Kierkegaard when we arrive at the third level, or the *religious stage*. Our movement from the aesthetic to the ethical level required an act of choice and commitment; it ushered us into the presence of reason inasmuch as the moral law is an expression of our universal reason. But the movement from the ethical to the religious level is quite different. The leap of faith does not bring one into the presence of a God who can be philosophically or rationally described as the Absolute and Knowable Truth (and therefore objective) but into the presence of a Subject. The secret of religious consciousness, says Kierkegaard, is that the existing individual cannot pursue God in an "objective way," or "bring God to light objectively." This, says Kierkegaard, "is in all eternity impossible because God is subject, and therefore exists only for subjectivity in inwardness." At the ethical level, it is possible for the existing individual to give his or her life, as Socrates did, for the moral law that he or she rationally understands. But when it is a question of one's relation to God, there is available no rational or conceptual or objective knowledge about this relationship.

The relationship between God and each individual is a unique and subjective experience. There is no way, prior to the actual relationship, to get any knowledge about it. Any attempt to get such objective knowledge about it is, says Kierkegaard, entirely an *approximation process*. Only an act of faith can assure the existing individual of his or her personal relation to God. That we must find our self-fulfillment in God becomes clear to us as we discover the inadequacy of our existence at the aesthetic and ethical levels. Through despair and guilt we are brought to the decisive moment in life when we confront the final *either-or* of faith. The existence of God is suggested to us in our awareness of our self-alienation, that subjective awareness of the contrast between our existential and our essential selves. That God has disclosed Himself in Christ is a further complication, indeed a *paradox*. To say, as Christian faith does, that God, the infinite, is revealed in Christ, the finite, is an extraordinary affront to human reason, "to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness." But Kierkegaard wanted to maintain that the only way to cross the

span between man and God, that "infinite qualitative distinction between time and eternity," is not through speculative reason, not even Hegel's, but through faith. Again, truth for Kierkegaard was a subjective matter, a consequence of commitment. Without risk, said Kierkegaard, there is no faith. And with faith, the existing individual realizes his true self.

Kierkegaard's existentialism can be summed up in his statement that "Every human being must be assumed in essential possession of what essentially belongs to being a man." This being the case, "the task of the subjective thinker is to transform himself into an instrument that clearly and definitely expresses in existence whatever is essentially human." This is Kierkegaard's central point, namely, that each person possesses an essential self, which he or she *ought* to actualize. This essential self is fixed by the very fact that human beings must inescapably become related to God. To be sure, we can *exist* at any one of the three stages along life's way. But the experience of despair and guilt creates in us an awareness of qualitative differences in various modes of existence, that some modes of human existence are more authentic than others. But arriving at authentic existence is not a matter of the intellect; it is a matter of faith and commitment, a continuous process of choice by the existing individual in the presence of varieties of *either-or*.

EDMUND HUSSERL

Husserl's Phenomenology

A major source of contemporary existentialism is the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl. The connection between existentialism and phenomenology is not always obvious since so much of Husserl's philosophy is cast in technical and even special scientific language, whereas existentialism focuses upon the immediate human concerns of our daily existence. Phenomenology is rationalistic whereas existentialism is concerned with such practical issues as making choices, decisions, and personal commitments. Moreover, a significant element in Husserl's phenomenology is the act of detachment, of standing back from the realm of experienced existence in order to understand it, whereas existentialism urges a life of thoroughgoing engagement and involvement as the surest way of creating meaning for human existence. Although there are these and other differences between existentialism and phenomenology, it is the spectacular spread of existentialism that has brought Husserl's thought before a wider audience. Husserl can rightly be called the "father" of phenomenology, but he is also the first in a line of thinkers who, together, encompass many modes of existentialism and phenomenology. Among those influenced in various ways by Husserl's insights were the philosophers Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre.

Edmund Husserl was born in the Moravian province of Prossnitz in 1859, the same year in which Bergson and Dewey were born. After his early education in that province, he went to the University of Leipzig where, from 1876 to



Edmund Husserl

1878, he studied physics, astronomy, and mathematics and found time to attend lectures by the philosopher Wilhelm Wundt. Husserl continued his studies at the Friederich Wilhelm University in Berlin and later, in 1881, he went to the University of Vienna where, in 1883, he earned his Ph.D. for his dissertation on "Contributions to the Theory of the Calculus of Variations." During 1884 to 1886, he attended the lectures of Franz Brentano (1838-1917), who became a most significant influence on Husserl's philosophical development, especially through his lectures on Hume and John Stuart Mill and his treatment of problems in ethics, psychology, and logic. On Brentano's advice, Husserl went to the University of Halle where in 1886 he became an assistant under Carl Stumpf (1848-1936), the eminent psychologist under whose direction he wrote his first book, Philosophy of Arithmetic (1891). His Logical Investigations appeared in 1900 and in the same year he was invited to join the philosophy faculty at the University of Göttingen. It was here that Husserl spent six