

INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW EXISTENTIALISM

Colin Wilson

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PREFACE

The purpose of this book is described in its title. The philosophy that is at present known as existentialism is identified mainly with the names of Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Sartre. It is fundamentally pessimistic – even nihilistic – and a limit seems to have been reached in its development. For more than twenty-five years, there has been no new contribution; Kierkegaard's *Unscientific Postscript*, Heidegger's *Being and Time* and Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* remain standard works that have not been superseded. Existentialism has halted in a *cul de sac*.

In the six volumes of my 'Outsider sequence',¹ I have attempted to outline a 'new existentialism' that will possess what is so notably lacking in Heidegger and Sartre – the possibility of future development. The present book is an attempt to present the basic arguments of the 'Outsider sequence' in a simple and non-technical language for the ordinary intelligent reader. It presupposes no previous acquaintance with existentialism or with the 'Outsider sequence.' I have preferred to speak of a 'new existentialism' rather than a 'phenomenological existentialism' because it is less of a mouthful; but later in the present volume, the two terms are used as interchangeable.

1. *The Outsider*, 1956, *Religion and the Rebel*, 1957, *The Age of Defeat* (called in America *The Stature of Man*), 1959, *The Strength to Dream*, 1962, *Origins of the Sexual Impulse*, 1963, *Beyond the Outsider*, 1965.



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When I first came to London, in 1951, at the age of 19, existentialism had just crossed the channel from the continent. Not many people understood it – the British are not noticeably intellectual by nature – but you could still hear it being discussed in the corners of late night coffee bars by men with beards and corduroy trousers. What appealed – apparently – was not so much the revolt against 19th century idealism, as the crude drama of its talk about ‘nausea’, absurdity, shipwreck and the ‘leap of faith’. (This is what made Guido Ruggiero say contemptuously: ‘Existentialism treats life in the manner of a thriller’.)

I found it all heady stuff; for until this time, the chief influences on my own thinking had been Bernard Shaw and T. S. Eliot. But I was worried by its underlying assumption: that human existence is futile and meaningless, and the best we can do is to give it a kind of arbitrary meaning with an act of choice. I suppose my own basic starting point was a certain mysticism – the sudden feeling of tremendous delight in nature that Wordsworth talks about in ‘The Prelude’, or what G. K. Chesterton calls the sense of ‘absurd good news’. So while I found Sartre, Camus and Heidegger exciting, I felt, quite simply, that a whole dimension was lacking.

In 1956, my first book, *The Outsider*, placed me in the position of what one critic called ‘our only home-grown existentialist’. But where serious critics were concerned, the original interest in its ideas quickly turned into a sour disapproval of the publicity surrounding the ‘angry young men’, with whom my name was linked. By the beginning of 1957, I doubt whether a

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single one of them would have agreed that the book contained any new ideas. My second book, *Religion and the Rebel* (which, in Japan, is rightly entitled *The Outsider Part Two*) received short shrift. I felt thoroughly irritated – embittered would be too strong a word – by the total impossibility of getting ideas discussed seriously in England or America, and envied Sartre and Heidegger for being born into the European intellectual tradition. But I persisted – largely because there was nothing else to do; the ideas were the centre of my life. I continued to work at this problem of the ‘futility hypothesis’ in existentialism, and to try to find a way out that did not involve either a ‘leap of faith’, or Sartre’s surrender to the crude drama of Marxism.

A chapter called ‘The Theory of Symbolic Response’ in *Origins of the Sexual Impulse* was perhaps my most important step forward in the decade following *The Outsider*; and ten years after *The Outsider* was written, *Beyond the Outsider* completed the structure of what I liked to think of as my ‘optimistic existentialism’. But no one paid much attention. I decided that perhaps it was a bit too much to expect my readers to read the six volumes of my ‘Outsider sequence’, and that I would try and summarise its essence in one short volume. The result was *Introduction to the New Existentialism* (1966), perhaps the best and clearest summary of my central ideas.

If the others had been ignored, this was not even noticed – not in England, at any rate. But it brought a perceptive and sympathetic review from Grattan Freyer in Dublin that made me realise that my time had not been entirely wasted.

The book quickly went out of print. Ten years later, it was the hardest book of mine to come by, and second-hand prices had rocketed – I paid £10 for a copy in the late seventies. So when Wildwood House suggested reprinting one of my books, I had no doubt which it should be. If I have contributed anything to existentialism – or, for that matter, to

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twentieth-century thought in general, here it is. I am willing to stand or fall by it.

Colin Wilson
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Part One

THE CRISIS IN MODERN THOUGHT