The title of this set of selections was carefully chosen: existential philosophy, not existentialism. To refer to this current of thought as an “ism” is to imply a degree of uniformity that is not present. Existential philosophers rejected system-building in philosophy, whether it was the Hegelian system of the nineteenth century or the thought systems dominated by natural science in the twentieth century. Independent-mindedness was a characteristic of these thinkers, so much so that most of them did not even accept the designation “existentialist.” *Je ne suis pas existentialiste,* “I am not an existentialist,” said Albert Camus, often included as one of the leading literary figures affected by existential philosophy. Jean-Paul Sartre, it seems, was one of the few thinkers willing to adopt the title “existentialist” and to define what was distinctive in his approach to philosophy. So, in attempting to present the thought of this collection of independent-minded thinkers, we must guard against the tendency to make them appear systematic. How to do this? That is the problem.

Perhaps the best way to initiate a discussion of existential philosophy is to use a line from Kurt Vonnegut’s *Breakfast of Champions:* bad ideas make you sick. Søren Kierkegaard knew this (even referring to the “sickness unto death”) and so did Friedrich Nietzsche. In general existential philosophers claimed that what we think does indeed make a difference in what kind of persons we are. That question—the kind of persons we are—is a central one for philosophy; indeed, existential philosophers claim it is the question for philosophy. It can be posed in a variety of ways: Is there such a thing as human nature? What does it mean to be a human being? What kind of philosophy deserves the name “humanism”?

Ever since the eighteenth century the question of human nature and human capabilities dominated philosophical thought. Just look at the titles of some of the books from that century: *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Hume); *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowl-
edge (Berkeley); and An Essay Concerning Human Understanding (Locke). But by the nineteenth century the emphasis shifted from the human to the cosmic, best exemplified by G. W. F. Hegel’s philosophy of the absolute in which the human is relegated to a minor role. Kierkegaard came on the scene and called philosophy back to the more basic question of what it means to be an existing individual. He likened Hegelian philosophy to an elaborate and intricate castle, beautiful to behold, but built by a man who lives in a shack in the castle’s shadow.

And then there was Nietzsche, that enigmatic genius whose autobiography contains the three chapters entitled, “Why I am So Wise,” “Why I am So Clever,” and “Why I Write Such Good Books.”2 Nietzsche, however, saw something that first terrified him and then led to the development of his own doctrine of will to power: we cannot continue to do philosophy in the old way. The old assumptions are gone, but the full implications of this are only gradually becoming apparent. Nietzsche was a transitional figure who died at the dawn of the twentieth century and did not live to see some of his concerns coming true.

During the twentieth century the efforts of some philosophers turned to a critique of the prevailing intellectual framework of the time, which was dominated by natural science. We must be careful here and not fall into an anti-science diatribe. Natural science is a powerful tool for understanding nature and its processes. It becomes threatening, however, when it is taken as the total system of explanation and views human beings as just things among other things. It succeeds because it deals with what can be observed and quantified, but it faces the temptation to decree that what cannot be observed and quantified is not real. So, how are we to rescue the distinctively human dimension of our existence? That is the central question for existential philosophers.

Here in the twenty-first century, should we look back upon existential philosophy as merely an expression of the concerns of its age, as a kind of Zeitgeist produced by the upheavals of the early twentieth century? The answer, in good existential fashion, is yes, and no. Certainly the most powerful expressions of existential sentiment occurred at mid-twentieth century after the killing machines of two world wars had created massive destruction and the killing systems of National Socialism nearly succeeded in eradicating an entire race. That these wars and these barbarities occurred not in the most backward nations of the world but in the most technologically and scientifically sophisticated meant something was terribly wrong with the pre-
vailing world view. Somebody should call it into question, and existential philosophers took on that task.

In another sense, however, the themes of existential philosophy were not just the expression of a civilization exhausted by two world wars but continue on, though perhaps in different forms. Here are some of those themes, though they should not be taken as a systematic program for thought (no system-building, remember?).

1. Rejection of thought systems that objectify human beings
2. Reaction against any philosophy that fails to distinguish between human and non-human reality
3. Emphasis on human freedom and the resulting responsibility for decisions
4. Inclusion of all human concerns as appropriate for philosophical inquiry

The list could be extended, but this is a start. As you read through the selections from existential philosophers, ask yourself how the individual thinker expresses these themes. Also consider how the thinker might express similar concerns in the twenty-first century. Finally, look for additional issues that seem to be common concerns among different existential philosophers.

ENDNOTES

1Les Nouvelles littéraires, no. 954 (Nov. 15, 1945).

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

GENERAL WORKS


**WORKS ON INDIVIDUAL THINKERS**


