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The *Svadharma* Doctrine & Existentialism

In an earlier essay I pointed out the importance of clearing up the points in which a connection between the doctrines of the traditional East and certain very advanced intellectual trends of the West emerges. I then said that in many cases a serious and not amateurish knowledge of the former might well serve to complete the latter, liberating them from their aspect as opinions of a purely individual speculative nature, and also from everything affected by an atmosphere of crisis, such indeed as is that of our own modern Western civilization. In this way it would be possible to rise from those casual intuitions, attained by Europeans who are struggling in a state of profound critical labor, to the plane of an objective and super-personal knowledge, which should be defined as "wisdom" rather than "philosophy."

I here wish to deal in this sense with certain specific aspects of a trend of thought, very fashionable today, known as "existentialism," selecting as a counterpart to it the Hindu doctrine of "*svadharma*" [one's own *dharma* or duty in relation to the larger cosmic order--Ed.].

With reference to existentialism I shall naturally not consider its eccentric and bohemian forms, of a predominantly literary character, which are unfortunately those to which this trend chiefly owes its new popularity. I wish rather to refer to the serious, philosophical existentialism, which took shape even before World War II, and which, after Søren Kierkegaard (and in certain respects Nietzsche), had as its chief interpreters Jaspers, Heidegger, and Barth. I will first try to set forth certain basic ideas of existentialism in the most accessible manner. This task is no easy one in a short article, on account of the peculiar, almost esoteric nature of the terminology of the existentialists, in which many words are often used with meanings wholly different from the usual ones.

The basis of existentialism lies in the conception of "existence." Now this expression must not be taken in the common, simple sense. Existence, according to Kierkegaard, signifies the paradoxical and contradictory point, in which the finite and the infinite, the temporal and the eternal are implied and meet together. For existence here is naturally intended that of the Ego, of the individual being,

which is therefore considered as a synthesis of contradictory elements. His spiritual situation is such that he cannot affirm himself (the finite being who exists in time), without also affirming the "other" than himself (the unconditioned, the temporary, the absolute being); but, on the other hand, he cannot affirm the transcendent, without also affirming himself, the being existing in time. To doubt the one means also to doubt the other. This is the general premise of existentialism, as asserted by all its leading interpreters, from Kierkegaard to Lavelle, from Barth to Jaspers. Here it is suitable to point out the harmony of this line of thought with the views of traditional Hinduism. In the first place, there is the question of method: existentialism seeks to reach an intimacy in the very center of the individual, which should at the same time have the value of metaphysical experience. But this may be said to be the method of the whole of upanishadic yoga and also Buddhist philosophy, to which we may well apply the formula of a "transcendental experimentalism." In the second place it is obvious that this ambiguous meeting point between the center of the finite being and the unconditioned more or less reminds us of the *atma*, which presents the actual features, so to speak, of an "immanent transcendency," of something which is the Ego, and at the same time a super-Ego, the eternal Brahman.

Nevertheless the paradox of "existence," understood in the above-mentioned sense, takes the form of a problem. We find ourselves, as it were, before an unsustainable position of unstable equilibrium, which must be solved in the function of one or the other of the two terms, which meet in the individual, but seem to exclude, to contradict each other as well: the conditioned and the unconditioned the temporal and the non-temporal.

The two possible solutions correspond to two directions actually followed by existentialism, in connection with which I may mention the names of Heidegger and Sartre on the one hand, of Jaspers and above all of Barth on the other.

The solution proper to Heidegger's philosophy is that of the man which tries to find the unconditioned in the transitory. The point according to this thinker, presents itself as follows: existence in time means existing as an individual and as an individualized being. But individuality signifies particularity, it signifies the affirmation and assumption of a certain group of possibilities, to the exclusion of others, the whole of the others; but these subsist, they live within the individual, they constitute the sense of the infinite within him, and tend to find expression, to realize themselves. This determines the movement of the Ego in time, a movement conceived in the sense of emerging from ourselves (from our own defined particularity), as a tendency to realize all that which we have excluded from ourselves, to live through it in a succession of experiences: a succession

which evolves as time, and which should represent the substitute for totality, for all that which the individual, as such, cannot be simultaneously. Naturally, to the infinitude of possibilities corresponds necessarily the infinitude of time, and all this gives to some extent the feeling of pursuing one's own shadow: a pursuit without ever attaining, without ever entirely gaining possession of oneself, so as to calm and solve the antithesis and the "anguish" proper to "existence."

This solution of Heidegger's thus ends in a sort of metaphysical justification of sanctification of that which, in Hindu terms, might be called the *samsara*, the *samsaric* consciousness. This seems to us a dangerous position, inasmuch as it goes towards the various modern Western philosophies of immanency, of "Life," of becoming, a position which, in our opinion, can with difficulty be linked up with any traditional conception of the world. Indeed, a non-concealed gloomy pessimism broods over the whole of Heidegger's philosophy.

The second existentialist trend, that of Jaspers and Barth, is in a different situation. Starting from more or less similar premises, importance is given to the concept that, if the individual represents one particular possibility amid an infinity of others, which fall outside from him, this definite possibility emanates from choice. This choice naturally brings us to something which is before time and before existence within time. The solution of the antithesis is given by the "ethics of fidelity": that which we are in time we must assume, we must regard "our own essence as identical to our own existence," we are to remain true to what we are, having the presentiment that it is something eternal, which, through ourselves, becomes "temporalized" itself, that everything which appears as a necessity, as fate, as hardship, sends us to something which is *willed*, to a being which is so because he has chosen to be so, taking on this particular nature, excluding every other possible nature.

Thus, together with the precept of faithfulness to ourselves, there is, in existentialism, also the precept of clarification (*Erhellung*). The rule of life of this existentialism is not the search for something else, the dispersion of ourselves in the infinite, problematic multiplicity of the perspectives presenting themselves in the outer world, and still less does it signify the pursuit in time—as Heidegger claims—of the mirage of the ever-escaping unconditioned; we should instead assume our own perspective or vision of the world, to seize and realize its *meaning*, which is equivalent to saying its transcendental root, that will whereby I am what I am, and that in existence we may realize only on the basis of its traces, of its effects. Then existence will appear to be merely the prosecution in time of something which exists before time, and every necessity or finitude will reveal itself as the consequence of the primordial act of a free power.

Whoever knows the doctrine of *dharma* and of *svadharma* cannot fail to note the analogies with it of these existentialist views. According to the Hindu conception, every being has a nature of his own. It is not mere chance that we are what we are and not something else. To this nature—unless we feel a vocation for a higher ascent—we must remain true; faithfulness to our own nature, whatever it may he, is the highest cult which we may render to the Supreme Spirit.

Thus, to be ourselves to assume our own position and tend to our own individual perfection, without letting ourselves be distracted or seduced by exterior interests, aims or values. There is no nature of our own, a *dharma*, superior or inferior to another, if we take—as we should take—the infinite, that which is beyond time, as measure. Hence to betray one's own *dharma*—the law of one's own nature—to assume the *dharma*—the manner of being, the law, the path—of another is error and fault: fault, not in the moral sense, but in the ontological sense. It is a hurt against the cosmic order—*rta*—equivalent to violence against ourselves; because we thus enter into contradiction with ourselves, we wish to be here, in time, something different from what we had wished to be beyond all time. The effect of this is disintegration, and therefore a descent in the hierarchy of beings (symbolically, hell). These are traditional Hindu concepts which we find expressed in the Laws of Manu, and, in a yet more definite form, in Bhagavad-gita. We know that in India they have not remained mere theory and philosophy, but have exercised a powerful influence on individual and collective life, constituting, among other things, the ethical and metaphysical basis of the caste system, of that system which has been so little understood by Westerners (although in the Middle Ages they had something of the same kind), while it is about to be set aside light-heartedly, by the modernized Oriental.

But, the general vision of the world and of man, in which the *svadharma* doctrine is framed, has dimensions which in existentialism are lacking; for this reason it is such as to integrate and render unexceptionable more than one doubtful point in this Western philosophy.

In this connection Barth must be set aside. He ends up in a theocentrism which enables him to connect existentialism with Christian theology. This theology, as we know, with Thomism defended the theory of "our own nature"—*natura propria*—and the ethics of fidelity to that nature, which is different in each man and is willed by God. But here, in our opinion, we are rising too high, and the reference to the theistic divinity, whose will should be responsible for being in this of that particular manner, is too pat and summary an explanation. The existentialist problem is only solved by faith, by trust in God, even though with the promise of a future vision of all things, and consequently also of ourselves, of

the course of one own life, "*sub specie aeternitatis*," a vision through which all obscurity will disappear. But all this is religion rather than metaphysics, and cannot prove satisfactory to all.

Let us rather return to Jaspers. The defective points of his theories, in which Hindu ideas can be helpful, concern the nature of that "choice," which must have been made on the non-temporal plane and which enables us to explain the coexistence, within existence, of the finite and the infinite. Above all the *place* of this choice remains wholly obscure—not less so than in Kant and Schopenhauer, who had already formulated something of the kind with their theories of the "intelligible character."

That obscurity is inevitable, owing to the practical non-existence, in Western philosophy and in religion itself, of the doctrine of *pre-existence* and of the *multiple states of being*. That, before birth, existed not simply the will of God, creating at His good pleasure souls out of nothing; that instead there had pre-existed a certain consciousness-entity, of which the existence of each one of us on earth is the manifestation—all this is a "*terra incognita*" for the majority of the Western philosophers and theologians: they hardly know anything of this kind.

But without references of this sort the whole existentialist theory suffers from an initial and basic obscurity. Incidentally it should be noticed that we have spoken of the theory of pre-existence, and not of that of "reincarnation" or karma, such as theosophists have disseminated it from the end of the last century in certain Western spiritualist circles. The first theory has nothing to do with the second—the one has a metaphysical, the other a popular character—and, as I have explained on various occasions, taken literally explains nothing, indeed it is an error.

From the first fault the second is derived, which refers to the sense of the act whereby we have wished to be what we find ourselves to be on earth and in time, namely, to the sense of transcendental choice or option, which takes the place of the Divine will and which is also a necessary precondition to be able to speak of responsibility and to justify the precept of fidelity to what we are.

Now, in this Jaspers only sees a fault: to have wished to be individuals signifies having wished to limit ourselves; but to limit ourselves signifies to sin, to sin against the infinite, against the unconditioned, which is fatally denied in all possibilities, in all manners of being excluded from the horizon of that single definite life. And with sin is associated naturally anguish, the famous "existential anguish" of the Ego.

This is indeed a strange idea, which betrays a certain pessimism, of which we find

traces in the earliest Greek philosophy and even in Orphism. If at the beginning of things, if up on high, on the hither side of time, there has truly been a free power, we cannot understand what "fault," what "sin" there can have been for him to have made a choice, for having decided in favor of a given mode of existence and not of another. That thus other possibilities must have been excluded or denied, that is logical and inevitable, nor do we know to whom that freedom should answer.

In any case, to speak here of "sin" is really nonsense. Then we should regard as a sin generating existential anguish the fact that, having a free evening, I elected to spend it in a nightclub, which of course prevents me from doing other things equally possible, such as going to a theatre, or to a lecture, or remaining at home to study, and so on.

The true infinite, for us, and for every true metaphysics, is not that which is, so to speak condemned to its ecstatic and indeterminate infinity, but it is that which it is, which it wishes to be, remaining unconditioned in our every act of its, retaining the sense of its primordial freedom and unconditioned state in all which it has willed and in which it has become. At most, once we have entered into the dominion of temporality, we must bear in mind that which the Far-Easterners call the law of concordant actions and reactions, and which the Hindus call karma, but in the true sense, not in that of the theosophists and popularizers.

It would be sufficient to enter into this order of ideas to confer on the above-mentioned existentialist notions an entirely different meaning, to remove from them all that is "crisis," "anguish," "invocation," or dispersion in a mean arbitrary action; all would pass on to a plane of higher calm, of transparency, of decision. And the precept of being ourselves, of fidelity to ourselves and to the "position" which we have in the reign of temporality, would acquire light—thanks to its relation with a truly unconditioned and super individual order.

Indeed the corresponding Hindu view—which the ancient West already knew (Plotinus, for instance, and even Plato before him)—might act in this sense on the existentialists who really might live their own problems, and this would be one the most significant points of a possible encounter between the thought of the East and the thought of the West.

Note

On the doctrine of *dharma* and castes, see my book *Revolt Against the Modern World*, trans. Guido Stucco (Rochester, Vt.: Inner Traditions, 1995), part I, chapter 14.

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