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Concept of the Encounter

Dialogue of an Existentialist with a Preacher

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

The age of existentialism—if a beginning can be calculated for a cultural development of such complexity—began shortly before the outbreak of World War I. In the spring of 1914 there appeared in Vienna a brochure in which the concept of the encounter was, apparently for the first time, isolated and defined in modern terms: "A meeting of two: eye to eye, face to face. And when you are near I will tear your eyes out and place them instead of mine, and you will tear my eyes out and will place them instead of yours, then I will look at you with your eyes and you will look at me with mine." It gradually became the central concept, not only for existential and religious counseling in the narrower sense, but also for modern forms of psychotherapy.

Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, the forerunners and prophets were dead, but their ideas and aspirations began to take crystallized form. It crystallized in two versions, the "heroic" existentialism represented by Buber and Moreno, expanding Kierkegaard's visions of a truly re-

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ligious life, and the "intellectual" existentialism, represented by Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Straus and others, following Hegel and Kant.

The concept of "Begegnung" or "Encounter" is taking increasingly the central place in all existential schools of thought, specially among those with a therapeutic orientation, men like Maeder, Trub, Binswanger, Boss, to mention but a few.

The meanings of the existential encounters are: 1) They do not enter the world as literary, intellectual productions, separated from existence, like books, records, etc. 2) They enter the world as actual events, as part of existence and integrated into it. They are encounters in the world, not in a philosophical but in a concrete sense, in the sense of confrontation. 3) Such actual events may be given "subsequently" literary forms and circulated. 4) The courage to encounter is a step beyond the courage to live. 5) The *actualization of encounter* is at the core of all modern group psychotherapy and psychodrama.

Between 1914 and 1920 a number of dialogues of encounters which have actually taken place were later reported in the *Daimon Magazine*. One of these encounters, in which a preacher, just ready to deliver a sermon, is challenged and confronted by his listeners, follows herewith.

Dramatis Personae: THE PREACHER

THE EXISTENTIALIST, A LISTENER

Place: Entrance to a Church

(The preacher leafs through a manuscript containing notes of his forthcoming sermon. One of the listeners walks up to him.)

LISTENER: I see you are the preacher. Would you please answer some of my questions?

PREACHER: You are a half hour too early and, don't you see, a hundred feet too close to me!

LISTENER: Please understand my awkward situation. I read an announcement somewhere and came here. Now I am in a quandary. Before I read the advertisement I felt free. Now I can't help it. I have the feeling of being trapped. Won't you answer just one single question?

PREACHER: Can't you see, man, I have no time to talk to you right now. I just asked you to come and listen. That is all! Why do you bother me with your talk? Don't you see I must not be disturbed now?

LISTENER: But you yourself have called me! I came! Have I not the right to an answer? And who authorized you to induce me with your announcement to come here?

PREACHER: And who gives you now the authority to interfere with my procedure?

LISTENER: Is it not yourself? I am only a simple listener who must seek out the purpose of your invitation from your voice and from your words. It is your responsibility to answer me now.

(The first listeners arrive.)

PREACHER: I am responsible for what I have to say here (points to his notes and to the manuscript), but not for anything else and not for anyone.

LISTENER: But as a preacher you lose your privacy. The preacher does not only prepare sermons for himself but also for the benefit of others! This then is the pressing question which I wish you would answer honestly. Has God given you this authority? And has he spoken such words as: "Hear, hear, man! In three months on a Sunday morning and at a certain hour take your sermon to the church on Main Street and preach it to the men and women who shall come to hear you preach a sermon. Until then see to it that as many as possible will learn of your intentions!"

PREACHER: God would only give such orders to a fool!

LISTENER: If someone claims to be responsible, he should also announce the authority giving him responsibility. If that however is missing, he must humbly admit that he has not received any assignment. When someone happens to be a preacher who preaches, not like a simple man at any place or time, whenever God's spirit comes over him, but one who proclaims to his audience a definite hour and special place of meeting, he must possess and be able to name the authority who tells him in advance when and where

God's spirit will descend upon him. This is the preacher's highest contradiction: to preach in all seriousness, after he has missed the decisive moment.

And it does not happen that someone has responsibility, and later on, gradually, acquires authority. Just the other way around; before such responsibility becomes feasible, the authority must be present in the beginning!

PREACHER: But I am responsible to myself.

LISTENER: Then you would have to call yourself the God to whom you are responsible. Then you would not be in contradiction to your authority, but both of you would be identical. Therefore you can say either: "I recognize an authority" or "I myself am the authority." And whoever is this himself, he can be an authority only for others, because the self can not be authority to his own self. Only God can be the authority and the obedient self in one. God alone means: responsibility to oneself.

PREACHER: But a man can simply be, simply exist. He will not seek anything from others because he lacks authority to do so, nor will he work for any cause because he is without purpose. To him one opinion is just like any other. And the difference between what is important and unimportant will not occur to his mind.

LISTENER: You are right—just as long as there is no responsibility. If it is there, then it must work in the time intervening between actions. For instance, in the time between the conception of an idea and its publication, in the time between the composition of a sermon and its delivery, between the enactment of a law and its application by the judge, between the decision to "love thy neighbour as thyself" and the readiness to practice it. The true essence of being a prophet is *existential* responsibility, his consistent show of responsibility in actual living.

PREACHER: But I am also here!

LISTENER: But at first your placard was here. And even now you give no speech. I still have to wait for a half an hour. Why? What meaning does this waiting have?

PREACHER: Closeness and immediacy are important for everyday living. But if you wish to talk about an important subject you need distance and respect, physically and metaphysically. Distance between preacher and listener is vital. A sermon is neither a dialogue nor a monologue, but something in between: it is placed at a certain distance from a speaking mind and a listening mind. The listener must not step out of his mute attitude.

(I just had entered the church when I saw Andreas, the preacher, and Martin, the listener, in a heated debate.)

LISTENER: What is *your* opinion on the perfect conduct of a preacher toward his listener?

I: Andreas, tell us first how you became a preacher! What made you compose your sermon? And how did you happen to come here? Then, if this suits you, I shall tell you what happened to me on similar occasions. But, before we start, I suggest that we strictly separate those actions which took place up to the moment of your decision to preach your sermon to others, from all those actions that followed. For it seems to me that this moment has been decisive and the key to the wisdom that we seek together!

PREACHER: Would you like to know what my speech is like? I believe that is unnecessary, because you can hear it in a short while, like everyone else.

I: Correct! The speech itself is unimportant. But tell us: what has your sermon done since you completed it up to the moment you decided to preach it to the community.

PREACHER: What has it done? Nothing! It just simply was within me, and seemed about to involve me at times; until, some day, it was to take another direction.

I: What direction?

PREACHER: Away from me—towards people!

I: Have you not, then, felt pangs of conscience? And has God not whispered into your ear: "Refrain, refrain, Andreas, from preaching to others, before your sermon has not helped you once and for good!"

PREACHER: Nothing have I noticed.

I: Oh, you are a poet, Andreas! Otherwise you would have hesitated! As long as the words came to you, you were safe in the spirit, and inaccessible to any dialectic. Although you might have actually completed your sermon in a day, your state of inspiration could have lasted much longer, yes, it could have gone on indefinitely: the sermon always short of its end, without ever finding its last part! Or: some day you could have finished your speech, and you could have repeated it interminably until the end of all days! This way you could have hidden it in your silence like a double! Never would you have become trapped in dialectics. And your whole inner life would have remained the silent story of your speech! Of course, you often would have come quite, quite close, during this time, to the moment of telling yourself: "Tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow, or in fifty years, I shall burst forth with my secret speech!" But as long as you only approached that moment, nothing had happened, and your truth was still out of danger! But when you declared to yourself with certainty: "Listen, Andreas, you are going to give your speech tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow, or in fifty years, come what may!"—at that moment you were lost, your freedom and your innocence had left. Dialectics has then seized you. And never, never shall you get rid of it again!—At that moment you had transformed many people, yes, all mankind, into your anonymous listeners.

PREACHER: At that moment, perhaps, I could have retracted everything. But a little later I had changed my hidden into an open and public goal. And I began, before the eyes of the world, that which I am about to conclude today.

I: Your mind entered the social sphere with its reciprocal strife. Simply by your plunge into space!—Did you not give your sermon a certain title? And were not announcements printed for it?—Why this noise? Before you were a creator! Unlimited by time and space! After that moment, you became the practical man, who advances towards a defined goal. Your work changed from a crea-

tion into merchandise, with a title as its trade-mark, that can be bought by anyone, a finished product! Your unlimited time turned into bought hours, minutes and seconds, and your exalted spaces shrank into precious little points. Your audience has lost the freedom of their bodies, and you the freedom of your word. (Of course nothing has happened yet. Your sermon still is your exclusive secret, and this dialectic confusion can still be solved by the acid test of your truth!) And finally you began to wait for the important day! To wait!—Why? Because of boredom, playfulness, conceit, avarice, curiosity, envy, desperation? Or because of all of them together?—Admit, my dear, has not God's spirit ever come in such moments? Has He not stammered: "Refrain, refrain, Andreas, from offering to your brothers the sacrifice of your sermon in such a roundabout way, when the perfect rests right outside the door."

PREACHER: Nothing of the sort has taken place. But what has happened—and I do not retract one step—it happened because of Love. Yes, it was my love that led my sermon toward men.

I: I see three possible courses of action for the hero who has composed a sermon ready for communication to others.

First: he is indifferent. He will keep his speech in silence, without noise, without spectators. And he will smile forgivingly at our addiction to guilt and atonement. He will guard his truth as if it were his other self. Not even death will separate them.—This is the situation of the saint.

Second: He is motivated *against* communication. The man has no reason to step out of silence; just the contrary, he has reason to remain silent. I have known someone like that. He had the air of a secretive eccentric whose whole life consisted in anxiously hiding his secret possessions.

PREACHER: A perverted egotist.

I: Nothing extraordinary for him. He did not wish to be recognized and he desired to die anonymously. But in his lonesomeness he worshipped the highest and finest perfection. If someone had the

opposite motivation, he would run, run with eager haste, away from his silence into the meetings with others. He would crave to offer all his secrets to them. But our madman enjoyed his deepest and most secretive happiness when he had moved farthest away from an understanding with others. And he practised gestures and phantasies which would help him to increase to infinity his distance from things. This behavior forms also the basis for his faith in God, as the one who can avoid any intrusion with such exquisite perfection.—And therefore he lied, not from desire, but to remain free. And just as the lie was his desire to be sincere, so he worshipped above all its finest instrument: language. It was his most sincere conviction that language was invented in order to be able to lie with perfection. He liked it best to promenade in darkness, with a blind servant following him. In his dwelling he did not tolerate any mirror; and the symbol lowest in his evaluation was that of water. Some day he will die under a foreign name.

PREACHER: But I am motivated by love, and so my story is just the exact opposite of the ones you told. Your madman did not wish to give of himself to others in order to remain full with himself. But I would like nothing more than to give myself completely in order to fulfill the others. I am in love—and because of this I am going to preach my sermon!

I: Very well then. With this you place yourself into the situation of the man who has reason to communicate his truth. *The question is not how to become a perfect preacher, but how to become a perfect lover.*

PREACHER: This is right.

I: What then has your love-inspired sermon done all this time?

PREACHER: Nothing. It has waited until the present day.

I: Tell me, sir, do you have servants in your home?

PREACHER: Yes, a few.

I: Do you still have a father and mother?

PREACHER: Certainly, they live with me.

I: Have you children, relatives, friends, acquaintances? Of course, you

have! Oh, don't get angry with me! Certainly you have them, and they live with you in the same house, or at least nearby. Your sermon—from the moment that you decided to speak it to the people of your parish, to speak it into the world—did it not stir, did it not begin to cry out, aroused by a deep sympathy, sympathy for the sad look in the eyes of your servant as he looked at you that morning, or the longing face of your sister? Have you tried your sermon on them, on the people closest to you, up to the lowest beggar knocking on your door? No, no, I read it in your eyes, you have done nothing (or made only some steps towards it); or, at least, you have not entered the situation with the full earnestness required by existential authority (Oh, man, and the perfect way of acting was so near—if your sermon intends to be more than an aesthetic or intellectual concoction). Tell me, did not the love you have for mankind give you any signs?

PREACHER: I did not notice anything; perhaps because I was too intent upon my goal. But I have always thought this way: keep your sermon to yourself, until you are in the place where it is to be given. I have always thought that the power of truth grows with the duration of keeping it silent.

I: Oh, you are a confused prophet, Sir! To remain silent in the face of an emergency which requires your help cannot be granted without special dispensation. Let us better confess, the God of Love, by whom you abide, did he not come over you, all the days that you passed by your neighbors? Did he not pray in your ears: "Hear, hear, why do you still wait with your love that I have given you?" And the real way of acting is so obvious!

PREACHER: My course was set. I did not notice anything that could stop me.

I: You have no yet started your sermon. All is not yet lost. The love for your fellowmen can still come to your assistance. Today, an hour ago, you left your house and started on the way here. When you went out on the street the porter bowed his head; when you came near the second corner of the block a little boy pleaded to

shine your shoes; on the left a lame and tired horse pulled a carriage; on your right there was an old friend who extended his arm to touch you. But you went on and on! Or did your sermon do something?

PREACHER: Nothing. It kept silent.

I: Was there no messenger from heaven who stepped out from one of the churches which you passed on the way to this place, pleading with you: "Do not run, do not pass! This is the moment, and the inspiration coming from it and its needs can come to your rescue!" Didn't you start out following the man who wanted to teach love? There is no question, that that man had the love within him, just like one who has the lover of his heart within him, or, still better, like one who has his sins and failings within him and is unable to get rid of them. And this man, he harbored love for a very long time, until the day he wanted to convince himself whether he really had it or not. What do you think? Would he, in order to put his love to a test, would he have ordered the people to a distant place, as far as possible away from him? (Oh, the love of this man loved speed and nearness!) Do you think that in that great and deep urge to help, he would have found the time to write and prepare a sermon neatly, or to make long and complicated preparations or even to stammer a short prayer in order to hearten himself? (Oh, the love of this man loved speed!) Oh no, and you know as well as I do, that the meaning of the lover and his decision is the present moment, the here and now, even though he has had all the living moments of the past and though he will go on to those awaiting him hereafter.

Tell me, Sir, if you would know that one of us needed your sermon badly, would you still not give it? Immediately, right now?

PREACHER: I would have to.

(The church becomes filled to capacity.)

PREACHER: I will, I will, right now. I see this is my encounter with God, my encounter with you and you and you.

(The preacher stops and thinks. He stammers and stutters. He speaks.

It is not the sermon he planned in his notes. It is something which burns within him and must come out, here and now. But not only the sermon is different, the timing is different. It is ten minutes ahead of him. Also the place is different, it is not as expected on the pulpit, in the regular fashion of religious business. The preacher is near the door. He walks out on the street and the crowd follows him. He explains to his surprised listeners the immediately provoking existential reasons for his behavior.)