

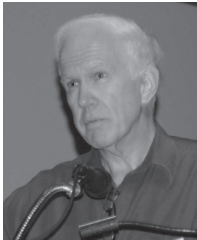
Thomas Merton and Existentialism

By **Ross Labrie**

Walter Kaufmann has observed persuasively that existentialism was not a distinct philosophy but a label for several different rebellions against traditional academic philosophy.¹ As Kaufmann and many others have noted, what united existentialists was an intense individualism and a dissatisfaction with philosophies that were remote from life. Moved by his growing attachment to the writings of Heidegger and Camus in the 1960s, Thomas Merton found himself more and more hospitable towards existentialism, both to the existentialists who were religious and to those who, like Camus, eschewed a religious affiliation. Merton became dissatisfied with the descriptions of the self that emerged from analytic metaphysics and in fact by rationalism itself. While he associated traditional systematic philosophy with essentialist views of the self, he regarded this knowledge as an incomplete accounting of the self. To fill this gap, Merton suggested, required a knowledge of the self based upon lifelong experience. What existentialism provided was the self found in what Merton called “personal self-realization.”² Existentialism, while not a systematic philosophy, as Merton recognized, nonetheless grew out of a desire to show the meaning of consciousness in everyday experience. As Merton put it, systematic, analytic philosophy wanted to know the answer to the question *what*, while existentialism wanted to know *who* (see *MZM* 263). In addition, Merton turned towards existentialism as a way of escaping the legalism, as he thought of it, that had overtaken Christian and particularly Catholic thought since the Reformation.

In turning away from fixed, rationalistic accounts of the self, Merton took up the phenomenological emphasis of existentialists like Heidegger with their focus on consciousness and on the effects of experience on consciousness. In Merton’s view, this shifted the emphasis from Cartesianism, with its dualistic focus on things as objects, to an emphasis on subjective meaning. Existentialism involved a study of how we experience and what fresh meanings are so produced. In addition to the testimony of reason, or in fact in place of reason, phenomenology, from which existentialism took its origins, included reflections on sense experience, on the functioning of imagination, thought and emotion, giving rise to an inclusive view of the self that appealed to Merton, as can be seen especially in his journals. Although such a reading of experience and the self was highly individualized, the accounts of their own experience by different persons could be understood and appreciated by others and thus could contribute to the growth of a human community. Arising out of the writings of the phenomenologists, existentialism abandoned traditional, rationalist theories of human beings to focus on states of consciousness.

In their preference for being over essence, the existentialists could approach reality, including the reality of God, directly through an intuitive awareness of being.³ Because of the subordination of rationalism, the existentialist seeker could become aware of God’s presence throughout creation, as can be seen in Merton’s daily



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reflections on nature, and of God's active presence in creation. In this way he became aware that his own existence enabled him to participate in the being of God.⁴ Furthermore, Merton accepted the view of Christian existentialists like Gabriel Marcel that an enlarged sense of being in turn enlarged the fullness of our sense of and partaking in reality. For this reason, he maintained that an existentialist approach would eventually lead to a consciousness of transcendence. This would apply even in the case of those who, like Albert Camus, had no formal religious consciousness (see *MZM* 269).

Through the developments in consciousness brought about by one's choices and experience, the self would eventually emerge as a distinct entity reflecting its formation following a lifetime of experience. The accumulation of experience and reflection contributed towards the definition of the self. In some cases, as in Jean-Paul Sartre's view, any theoretically derived, extraneous rationalistic versions of the self – such as those that included essentialism – were rejected out of court. Becoming and process were, Merton suggested, fundamental to the thinking of non-religious philosophers like Sartre. In Sartre, solely through the accumulation of experience and reflections on experience, the self moved ever closer to a process of self-definition. In Merton's view the seeing of being as an endless process of becoming sidestepped the fact that becoming lacked the reality of being. In a significant observation on this subject, Merton rejected the idea of being as process, arguing that becoming was far less “dynamic” than being itself (see *LE* 9).

In an analogous vein Merton rejected history as a fundamental basis for the creation of the self, a view that put him at odds with Marx, for whom history was the key to self-definition (see *CGB* 130-31). Merton was reluctant to accept history, as he believed Marx had done, to be the primary definer of human nature. In a remark about Marx's view of humanity Merton perceived Marx as pinning his idea of human beings to a transformation linked to social conflict and thereby to the overthrow of a traditional class structure. While Merton identified with the existentialists in their emphasis on experience in defining essence, he clung to the Aristotelian/Thomistic idea of human nature as containing a group of attributes that are essential to identify in considering what human nature is. At the same time, while Merton rejected the supremacy of an ahistoric, rationalist view of human nature, he insisted that the Christian essentialist should not limit meaning to the “ideal essences” of a “safe and static past” (*MZM* 277-78).

In seeking a balance between existentialism and essentialism, Merton affirmed the value of Camus' thinking. Camus held to the reality of human nature, but he also accepted the value of experience in arriving at an understanding of what “he in fact is” (*LE* 224). This individual kind of insight Merton saw as available in literature, with its emphasis on the concrete. Without this attention to the concrete, he argued, the searcher for meaning risked missing the truths hidden in experience, truths that may be overlooked by the abstractionism of an analytic philosophy. Thus, Merton's connecting of existentialism to literature was based on literature's avoidance of abstract formulations of reality. The key to the rendering of non-abstract states of consciousness lay in the creativity of the artist, a creativity that Merton believed was inherent in all human beings, having been implanted by the Creator. Creation became an important contributor to the development of the self. In Merton's view, just as the reason for a created work only emerges after the event, so too does the self emerge in retrospect following the trail of experience and reflection.⁵ Creativity through literature in particular would inevitably focus on the paradoxes that typically characterize our experience. Such, Merton thought, was the case with a writer like Flannery O'Connor, whose characters revealed how “good people [can be] bad” while “bad people tend to be less bad than they seem” (*MZM* 259). Some might argue that this view of Flannery O'Connor's characters is simply an example of her taste for irony rather than a sign of her existentialist viewpoint. However, Merton saw her taste for irony with its questioning of traditional appearances as

part of her existentialist perspective, arguing that the freshness that accompanied imaginative creativity allowed the artist to avoid the generalities and banalities of abstract formulation.

He regarded the existentialist emphasis on being as prior to the subject/object division that characterized rationalist, especially Cartesian philosophy. In this matter he valued the experience of pure consciousness, not a consciousness of someone or something but a consciousness in which the subject as such disappears. He saw this in Buddhism, whose point of view he regarded as broadly compatible with existentialism.⁶ Merton's perception of pure being, which he drew from Heidegger and Tillich, focused on the divine ground of being as the uniter of all reality. Moreover, Gabriel Marcel, a Christian existentialist whom Merton admired, had observed that the fuller our consciousness of being was, the fuller would be our participation in being. Qualifying this view, however, Merton distinguished between being as existence and being as action, noting that Western philosophy tended to equate being with action, leaving little room for experiencing or valuing being as such.

As with other existentialists, Merton was attracted to existentialism by its emphasis on the primacy of the individual conscience. At the same time this in turn involved upholding the sovereignty of the individual self as necessary for true communication between persons, each "with faces, identities, and histories of their own" (*MZM* 267). Merton wanted to emphasize the importance of communal relationships without identifying these with the "formless void of the anonymous mass" (*MZM* 266). He thought of existentialism as a choice to live contingently, accepting the solitude of the consciously realized self that sought freedom instead of a dependency on collective stereotypes.

It was this openness in existentialist thought that particularly appealed to Merton and that he regarded as within what he called the "roots of our created being" (*ZBA* 25). This openness complemented the individual creativity that underlay the formation of the self, which was freed by experience from dogmatic formulas that in both church and state had for centuries frozen its development. Kierkegaard, with whose writings Merton was familiar, related this suppression of the self to a leveling through which the possibilities for individual growth and expression were stifled by the flatness of the collective voice (see *MZM* 264). Similarly, Heidegger, who had an even more pronounced effect on Merton's thinking, asserted the primacy of existence over essence, making possible what Merton characterized as one's potentiality for being. This potentiality for being stemmed from God as "pure Being," through which the individual self participated by its very creation (*CGB* 201). What the Christian should seek, Merton maintained, was an experience of unity in God as the epitome of being, in this way gaining "the taste and experience of eternal life" (*ZBA* 39). Far too often, Merton believed, religion for many Christians involved an overriding pursuit of theological certainty. Whatever else it might be, Christianity, he maintained, was certainly not Gnostic (see *MZM* 278).

Merton thought extensively about the relationship between existentialism and religion, observing that existentialism was oriented towards a contemplative approach to being, a direction that he had himself taken in living a monastic life. Supporting this view, he drew attention to the existential emphasis of the books of the Bible (see *ZBA* 54-55). Biblical existentialism, he observed, was concrete and personal, and thereby more fundamentally Christian than the "rather abstract and intellectualist approach" that had dominated the Catholic worldview, for example, for around 700 years (*MZM* 270). Incorporating the belief that all being comes from God, the Bible emphasized not religious doctrine but a joyful awareness of creation and of God's presence in it.

Nonetheless, Merton was not a pantheist, as he explained in the prologue to *Raids on the Unspeakable* (see *RU* 1-2). In Merton's thinking God was being itself and was thus ubiquitous. In the context of existentialism Merton explained that the Christian mystics, in intuiting the presence of God, thereby rooted themselves in

a metaphysics of being (see *ZBA* 26). The psychological aspects of existentialism, particularly its openness to intuitive awareness, were crucial in helping to create individual consciousness and individual conscience. In time, Merton maintained, the seeker could achieve something of an understanding and meaning of the purpose of life as psychological intuitions developed into ontological insights. A sensitivity to being became the route along which such insights emerged for believers and non-believers alike.⁷ Indeed, Merton maintained that existentialism brought non-believers like Camus, if not towards religion in a formal sense, towards an expansion of their awareness of the ontological depths of being.

The opening of the psychological into the ontological was an idea that Merton had encountered in Jacques Maritain, who in other respects, was committed to rationalism and in particular to Thomistic metaphysics. Nonetheless, Maritain's interest in existentialism can be seen at different points in his writings, especially in *Existence and the Existent*.⁸ Moreover, he was open to the ontological value of intuitive insight, as can be seen in *Art and Scholasticism*⁹ and *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*.¹⁰ On the whole both Maritain and Merton took a balanced view of the tension between essence and existence. On his side Merton took the view that if one denied human beings their essence, there would be a concomitant loss of respect for their existence (see *CGB* 146). This balance between essence and existence paralleled the tension between analytical philosophy and intuitive understanding. Although Merton had a limited contact with systemic philosophy, largely through medieval scholasticism, he grasped the struggle that preoccupied the existentialists and distanced himself from philosophies that were preoccupied with technical analyses. Merton would have agreed with Walter Kaufmann that existentialism attempted to "bring philosophy down to earth" (Kaufmann 51). Following his intuitive awareness of being, Merton arrived at a direct confrontation with the God who was present amidst the "'is-ness' of every day reality" (*LE* 240). One of the most eloquent examples of his existential awareness is the well-known Fire Watch epilogue to *The Sign of Jonas*.¹¹ In that most evocative example of Merton's writing we encounter the young monk on his rounds pausing at the monastery belfry high above the ground and contemplating the starry expanse above him. So held, he found himself moving towards the God whose omnipotent existence he felt envelop him – at once and forever.

1. Walter Kaufmann, *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (Cleveland and New York: World, 1969) 11; subsequent references will be cited as "Kaufmann" parenthetically in the text.
2. "The Other Side of Despair," in Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967) 263; subsequent references will be cited as "MZM" parenthetically in the text.
3. See "Blake and the New Theology," in Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart, OCSO (New York: New Directions, 1981) 9-10; subsequent references will be cited as "*LE*" parenthetically in the text.
4. See Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 201; subsequent references will be cited as "*CGB*" parenthetically in the text.
5. See "Message to Poets," in Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 155; subsequent references will be cited as "*RU*" parenthetically in the text.
6. See Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968) 23-25; subsequent references will be cited as "*ZBA*" parenthetically in the text.
7. See Ross Labrie, "Thomas Merton on Atheism in Camus," in Ross Labrie and Angus Stuart, eds., *Thomas Merton: Monk on the Edge* (North Vancouver, BC: Thomas Merton Society of Canada, 2012) 169-89.
8. Jacques Maritain, *Existence and the Existent* (New York: Pantheon, 1948).
9. Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism* (New York: Scribner's, 1923).
10. Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (New York: Pantheon, 1953).
11. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953) 349-62; also found in Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer. Journals, vol. 2: 1941-1952*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 477-88.