

NOTES FROM: *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre*, by Walter Kaufmann

SUMMARY: Walter Kaufmann was one of the leading Nietzsche scholars, as well as being responsible for translating some of the most important books of all time from German to English. Man, I'm telling you, every time I pick up a philosophy book or some German classic, it says at the bottom: "Translated and with an introduction by Walter Kaufman." He's *everywhere*, and for good reason.

This is an anthology of some of the most famous and influential writings from the existentialist "movement" (for lack of a better word), including people like Sartre, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Dostoyevsky, Jaspers, Camus, and several more.

Almost every single one of them would have rejected the term "movement," but they're grouped together here (with an *excellent* introduction by Kaufmann) because they would all be labeled existentialists. All of them were concerned with the freedom of the individual, with authenticity, and with the weight of human responsibility.

The collection is often tough reading, but incredibly *rewarding* reading as well. The existentialists changed my life – *seriously* – and this is an impressive overview of some of their major ideas. *They'll stay with you*, urgently reminding you that you *are* in fact free in this world, and that what you *do* with that freedom is entirely up to you.

"Most of the living 'existentialists' have repudiated this label, and a bewildered outsider might well conclude that the only thing they have in common is a marked aversion to each other."

"The refusal to belong to any school of thought, the repudiation of the adequacy of any body of beliefs whatever, and especially of systems, and a marked dissatisfaction with traditional philosophy as superficial, academic, and remote from life – that is the heart of existentialism."

"The self is essentially intangible and must be understood in terms of possibilities, dread, and decisions. When I behold my possibilities, I experience that dread which is 'the dizziness of freedom,' and my choice is made in fear and trembling."

Sartre: "Life begins on the other side of despair."

Buddha: "All that we are is the result of what we have thought."

"All man's alibis are unacceptable: no gods are responsible for his condition; no original sin; no heredity and no environment; no race, no caste, no father, and no mother; no wrong-headed education, no governess, no teacher; not even an impulse or a disposition, a complex or a childhood trauma. Man is free; but his freedom does not look like the glorious liberty of the Enlightenment; it is no longer the gift of God. Once again, man stands alone in the universe, responsible for his condition, likely to remain in a lowly state, but free to reach above the stars."

Kierkegaard: "The communicator of the truth can only be a single individual."

“A crowd is the untruth.”

“The human being who does not wish to belong to the mass must merely cease being comfortable with himself; let him follow his conscience which shouts at him: ‘Be yourself! What you are at present doing, opining, and desiring, that is not really you.’”

“For, believe me, the secret of the greatest fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment of existence is: *to live dangerously!* Build your cities under Vesuvius! Send your ships into uncharted seas!”

Nietzsche: “I never speak to masses.”

Rilke: “The wish to have a death of one’s own is becoming rarer and rarer. A little while yet, and it will be as rare as a life of one’s own.”

“Is it possible that, in spite of inventions and progress, in spite of culture, religion, and wisdom, one has remained at the surface of life?”

“It is for the sake of truthfulness that Kafka eschews reduction to a single explanation. The world that confronts us and our life in it defy every attempt at a compelling exegesis: that life lends itself to many different interpretations is of its essence.”

“Man, in his empirical reality, can be a subject of research in many different directions; but man is always more than he knows or can know about himself.”

“On all paths it is essential to reach the Source where in highest consciousness the demand becomes audible in the world which, in spite of failing to be recognized in the world, yet produces the true Being through obedience to it. Philosophy can clarify that such a Source is possible; yet what the Source is and what it speaks it cannot anticipate. For reality is historical and awaits every individual that arises anew in this world. Everything that philosophy says in substance and remembers in history remains relative, insofar as it is utterable, and has to be translated and appropriated in order to become a path to one’s own original comprehension of the Unconditional.”

“There is a leap between the multiplicity of subjective consciousness and the universal validity of that true consciousness which can only be *one*. As the consciousness of living beings, we are split into the multiplicity of endless particular realities, imprisoned in the narrowness of the individual and not encompassing. As consciousness in general, we participate in an inactuality, the universally valid truth, and, as such consciousness, are an infinite Encompassing. As a conscious living actuality, we are always a mere kind, even a unique individual enclosed within its own individuality. But we participate in the Encompassing through the possibility of knowledge and through the possibility of common knowledge of Being in every form in which it appears to consciousness. And, indeed, we participate, not only in the validity of the knowable, but also in a universally recognized, formal lawfulness in willing, action, and feeling. So defined, truth is timeless, and our temporal actuality is a more or less complete actualization of this timeless permanence.”

MK: “An Encompassing which has become objective is no longer the true Encompassing” sounds a lot like “The Tao that can be named is not the eternal Tao.”

“I am not authentically myself if I am merely what I know myself to be.”

“If I understand myself exclusively as an empirical existent, as a living natural being, since I have then objectified myself and conceived myself only insofar as I am an object, I have, at the same time, lost myself and substituted what I understand myself to be for what I can be.”

“No known being is Being itself. Every time I let Being itself slip into known being, Transcendence disappears, and I become dark to myself.”

Holderlin: “Who has thought about the deepest, loves what is most alive.”

Jaspers: “Man can seek the path of his truth in unfanatical absoluteness, in a decisiveness which remains open.”

“It takes a lot to intimidate a man who is going to die; it didn’t work.”

“It’s premature to pass judgement on humanity, because humanity is still being determined.”

“Crushing truths perish from being acknowledged.”

“There is no sun without shadow, and it is essential to know the night. The absurd man says yes and his effort will henceforth be unceasing. If there is a personal fate, there is no higher destiny, or at least there is but one which he concludes is inevitable and despicable. For the rest, he knows himself to be the master of his days. At that subtle moment when man glances backward over his life, Sisyphus returning toward his rock, in that slight pivoting he contemplates that series of unrelated actions which becomes his fate, created by him, combined under his memory’s eye and soon sealed by his death. Thus, convinced of the wholly human origin of all that is human, a blind man eager to see who knows that the night has no end, he is still on the go. The rock is still rolling. I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one’s burdens again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.”