

## The Ethics of Ambiguity. Simone de Beauvoir 1947

### III The Positive Aspect of Ambiguity

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#### The Aesthetic Attitude

Thus, every man has to do with other men. The world in which he engages himself is a human world in which each object is penetrated with human meanings. It is a speaking world from which solicitations and appeals rise up. This means that, through this world, each individual can give his freedom a concrete content. He must disclose the world with the purpose of further disclosure and by the same movement try to free men, by means of whom the world takes on meaning. But we shall find here the same objection that we met when we examined the abstract moment of individual ethics. If every man is free, he can not *will* himself free. Likewise the objection will be raised that he can will nothing for another since that other is free in all circumstances; men are always disclosing being, in Buchenwald as well as in the blue isles of the Pacific, in hovels as well as in palaces; something is always happening in the world, and in the movement of keeping being at a distance, can one not consider its different transformations with a detached joy, or find reasons for acting? No solution is better or worse than any other.

We may call this attitude aesthetic because the one who adopts it claims to have no other relation with the world than that of detached contemplation; outside of time, and far from men, he faces history, which he thinks he does not belong to, like a pure beholding; this impersonal version equalizes all situations; it apprehends them only in the indifference of their differences; it excludes any preference.

Thus, the lover of historical works is present at the birth and the downfall of Athens, Rome, and Byzantium with the same serene

passion. The tourist considers the arena of the Coliseum, the Latifundia of Syracuse, the thermal baths, the palaces, the temples, the prisons, and the churches with the same tranquil curiosity: these things existed, that is enough to satisfy him. Why not also consider with impartial interest those that exist today? One finds this temptation among many Italians who are weighed down by a magical and deceptive past; the present already seems to them like a future past. Wars, civil disputes, invasions and slavery have succeeded one another in their land. Each moment of that tormented history is contradicted by the following one; and yet in the very midst of this vain agitation there arose domes, statues, bas-reliefs, paintings and palaces which have remained intact through the centuries and which still enchant the men of today. One can imagine an intellectual Florentine being skeptical about the great uncertain movements which are stirring up his country and which will die out as did the seethings of the centuries which have gone by: as he sees it, the important thing is merely to understand the temporary events and through them to cultivate that beauty which perishes not. Many Frenchmen also sought relief in this thought in 1940 and the years which followed. "Let's try to take the point of view of history," they said upon learning that the Germans had entered Paris. And during the whole occupation certain intellectuals sought to keep "aloof from the fray" and to consider impartially contingent facts which did not concern them.

But we note at once that such an attitude appears in moments of discouragement and confusion; in fact, it is a position of withdrawal, a way of fleeing the truth of the present. As concerns the past, this eclecticism is legitimate; we are no longer in a live situation in regard to Athens, Sparta, or Alexandria, and the very idea of a choice has no meaning. But the present is not a potential past; it is the moment of choice and action; we can not avoid living it through a project; and there is no project which is purely contemplative since one always projects himself toward something, toward the future; to put oneself "outside" is still a way of living the inescapable fact that one is inside; those French intellectuals who, in the name of history, poetry, or art,

sought to rise above the drama of the age, were willy-nilly its actors more or less explicitly, they were playing the occupier's game. Likewise, the Italian aesthete, occupied in caressing the marbles and bronzes of Florence, is playing a political role in the life of his country by his very inertia. One can not justify all that is by asserting that everything may equally be the object of contemplation, since man never contemplates: he does.

It is for the artist and the writer that the problem is raised in a particularly acute and at the same time equivocal manner, for then one seeks to set up the indifference of human situations not in the name of pure contemplation, but of a definite project: the creator projects toward the work of art a subject which he justifies insofar as it is the matter of this work; any subject may thus be admitted, a massacre as well as a masquerade. This aesthetic justification is sometimes so striking that it betrays the author's aim; let us say that a writer wants to communicate the horror inspired in him by children working in sweatshops; he produces so beautiful a book that, enchanted by the tale, the style, and the images, we forget the horror of the sweatshops or even start admiring it. Will we not then be inclined to think that if death, misery, and injustice can be transfigured for our delight, it is not an evil for there to be death, misery, and injustice?

But here too we must not confuse the present with the past. With regard to the past, no further action is possible. There have been war, plague, scandal, and treason, and there is no way of our preventing their having taken place; the executioner became an executioner and the victim underwent his fate as a victim without us; all that we can do is to reveal it, to integrate it into the human heritage, to raise it to the dignity of the aesthetic existence which bears within itself its finality; but first this history had to occur: it occurred as scandal, revolt, crime, or sacrifice, and we were able to try to save it only because it first offered us a form. Today must also exist before being confirmed in its existence: its destination in such a way that everything about it already seemed justified and that there was no

more of it to reject, then there would also be nothing to say about it, for no form would take shape in it; it is revealed only through rejection, desire, hate and love. In order for the artist to have a world to express he must first be situated in this world, oppressed or oppressing, resigned or rebellious, a man among men. But at the heart of his existence he finds the exigency which is common to all men; he must first will freedom within himself and universally; he must try to conquer it: in the light of this project situations are graded and reasons for acting are made manifest.

### **Freedom and Liberation**

One of the chief objections leveled against existentialism is that the precept “to will freedom” is only a hollow formula and offers no concrete content for action. But that is because one has begun by emptying the word freedom of its concrete meaning; we have already seen that freedom realizes itself only by engaging itself in the world: to such an extent that man’s project toward freedom is embodied for him in definite acts of behavior.

To will freedom and to will to disclose being are one and the same choice; hence, freedom takes a positive and constructive step which causes being to pass to existence in a movement which is constantly surpassed. Science, technics, art, and philosophy are indefinite conquests of existence over being; it is by assuming themselves as such that they take on their genuine aspect; it is in the light of this assumption that the word progress finds its veridical meaning. It is not a matter of approaching a fixed limit: absolute Knowledge or the happiness of man or the perfection of beauty; all human effort would then be doomed to failure, for with each step forward the horizon recedes a step; for man it is a matter of pursuing the expansion of his existence and of retrieving this very effort as an absolute.

Science condemns itself to failure when, yielding to the infatuation of the serious, it aspires to attain being, to contain it, and to possess it; but it finds its truth if it considers itself as a free engagement of

thought in the given, aiming, at each discovery, not at fusion with the thing, but at the possibility of new discoveries; what the mind then projects is the concrete accomplishment of its freedom. The attempt is sometimes made to find an objective justification of science in technics; but ordinarily the mathematician is concerned with mathematics and the physicist with physics, and not with their applications. And, furthermore, technics itself is not objectively justified; if it sets up as absolute goals the saving of time and work which it enables us to realize and the comfort and luxury which it enables us to have access to, then it appears useless and absurd, for the time that one gains can not be accumulated in a store house; it is contradictory to want to save up existence, which, the fact is, exists only by being spent, and there is a good case for showing that airplanes, machines, the telephone, and the radio do not make men of today happier than those of former times. But actually it is not a question of giving men time and happiness, it is not a question of stopping the movement of life: it is a question of fulfilling it. If technics is attempting to make up for this lack, which is at the very heart of existence, it fails radically; but it escapes all criticism if one admits that, through it, existence, far from wishing to repose in the security of being, thrusts itself ahead of itself in order to thrust itself still farther ahead, that it aims at an indefinite disclosure of being by the transformation of the thing into an instrument and at the opening of ever new possibilities for man. As for art, we have already said that it should not attempt to set up idols; it should reveal existence as a reason for existing; that is really why Plato, who wanted to wrest man away from the earth and assign him to the heaven of Ideas, condemned the poets; that is why every humanism on the other hand, crowns them with laurels. Art reveals the transitory as an absolute; and as the transitory existence is perpetuated through the centuries, art too, through the centuries, must perpetuate this never-to-be-finished revelation. Thus, the constructive activities of man take on a valid meaning only when they are assumed as a movement toward freedom; and reciprocally, one sees that such a movement is concrete: discoveries, inventions, industries, culture, paintings, and

books people the world concretely and open concrete possibilities to men.

Perhaps it is permissible to dream of a future when men will know no other use of their freedom than this free unfurling of itself; constructive activity would be possible for all; each one would be able to aim positively through his projects at his own future. But today the fact is that there are men who can justify their life only by a negative action. As we have already seen, every man transcends himself. But it happens that this transcendence is condemned to fall uselessly back upon itself because it is cut off from its goals. That is what defines a situation of oppression. Such a situation is never natural: man is never oppressed by things; in any case, unless he is a naive child who hits stones or a mad prince who orders the sea to be thrashed, he does not rebel against things, but only against other men. The resistance of the thing sustains the action of man as air sustains the flight of the dove; and by projecting himself through it man accepts its being an obstacle; he assumes the risk of a setback in which he does not see a denial of his freedom. The explorer knows that he may be forced to withdraw before arriving at his goal; the scientist, that a certain phenomenon may remain obscure to him; the technician, that his attempt may prove abortive: these withdrawals and errors are another way of disclosing the world. Certainly, a material obstacle may cruelly stand in the way of an undertaking: floods, earthquakes, grasshoppers, epidemics and plague are scourges; but here we have one of the truths of Stoicism: a man must assume even these misfortunes, and since he must never resign himself in favor of any *thing*, no destruction of a thing will ever be a radical ruin for him; even his death is not an evil since he is man only insofar as he is mortal: he must assume it as the natural limit of his life, as the risk implied by every step. Only man can be an enemy for man; only he can rob him of the meaning of his acts and his life because it also belongs only to him alone to confirm it in its existence, to recognize it in actual fact as a freedom. It is here that the Stoic distinction between “things which do not depend upon us” and those which “depend upon us” proves to be insufficient: for “we” is legion

and not an individual; each one depends upon others, and what happens to me by means of others depends upon me as regards its meaning; one does not submit to a war or an occupation as he does to an earthquake: he must take sides for or against, and the foreign wills thereby become allied or hostile. It is this interdependence which explains why oppression is possible and why it is hateful. As we have seen, my freedom, in order to fulfill itself, requires that it emerge into an open future: it is other men who open the future to me, it is they who, setting up the world of tomorrow, define my future; but if, instead of allowing me to participate in this constructive movement, they oblige me to consume my transcendence in vain, if they keep me below the level which they have conquered and on the basis of which new conquests will be achieved then they are cutting me off from the future, they are changing me into a thing. Life is occupied in both perpetuating itself and in surpassing itself; if all it does is maintain itself, then living is only not dying, and human existence is indistinguishable from an absurd vegetation; a life justifies itself only if its effort to perpetuate itself is integrated into its surpassing and if this surpassing has no other limits than those which the subject assigns himself. Oppression divides the world into two clans: those who enlighten mankind by thrusting it ahead of itself and those who are condemned to mark time hopelessly in order merely to support the collectivity; their life is a pure repetition of mechanical gestures; their leisure is just about sufficient for them to regain their strength; the oppressor feeds himself on their transcendence and refuses to extend it by a free recognition. The oppressed has only one solution: to deny the harmony of that mankind from which an attempt is made to exclude him, to prove that he is a man and that he is free by revolting against the tyrants. In order to prevent this revolt, one of the ruses of oppression is to camouflage itself behind a natural situation since, after all, one can not revolt against nature. When a conservative wishes to show that the proletariat is not oppressed, he declares that the present distribution of wealth is a natural fact and that there is thus no means of rejecting it; and doubtless he has a good case for proving that, strictly speaking, he is not *stealing* from the worker

“the product of his labor,” since the word *theft* supposes social conventions which in other respects authorizes this type of exploitation; but what the revolutionary means by this word is that the present regime is a human fact. As such, it has to be rejected. This rejection cuts off the will of the oppressor, in his turn, from the future toward which he was hoping to thrust himself alone: another future is substituted, that of revolution. The struggle is not one of words and ideologies; it is real and concrete, **if it is this future which triumphs, and not the former, then it is the oppressed who is realized as a positive and open freedom and the oppressor who becomes an obstacle and a thing.**

There are thus two ways of surpassing the given: it is something quite different from taking a trip or escaping from prison. In these two cases the given is present in its surpassing; but in one case it is present insofar as it is accepted, in the other insofar as rejected, and that makes a radical difference. Hegel has confused these two movements with the ambiguous term “aufheben”; and the whole structure of an optimism which denies failure and death rests on this ambiguity; that is what allows one to regard the future of the world as a continuous and harmonious development; this confusion is the source and also the consequence; it is a perfect epitome of that idealistic and verbose flabbiness with which Marx charged Hegel and to which he opposed a realistic toughness. Revolt is not integrated into the harmonious development of the world; it does not wish to be integrated but rather to explode at the heart of the world and to break its continuity. It is no accident if Marx defined the attitude of the proletariat not positively but negatively: he does not show it as affirming itself or as seeking to realize a classless society, but rather as first attempting to put an end to itself as a class. And it is precisely because it has no other issue than a negative one that this situation must be eliminated.

All men are interested in this elimination, the oppressor as well as the oppressed, as Marx himself has said, for each one needs to have all men free. **There are cases where the slave does not know his**

servitude and where it is necessary to bring the seed of his liberation to him from the outside: his submission is not enough to justify the tyranny which is imposed upon him. The slave is submissive when one has succeeded in mystifying him in such a way that his situation does not seem to him to be imposed by men, but to be immediately given by nature, by the gods, by the powers against whom revolt has no meaning; thus, he does not accept his condition through a resignation of his freedom since he can not even dream of any other; and in his relationships with his friends, for example, he can live as a free and moral man within this world where his ignorance has enclosed him. The conservative will argue from this that this peace should not be disturbed; it is not necessary to give education to the people or comfort to the natives of the colonies; the “ringleaders” should be suppressed; that is the meaning of an old story of Maurras: there is no need to awaken the sleeper, for that would be to awaken him to unhappiness. Certainly it is not a question of throwing men in spite of themselves, under the pretext of liberation, into a new world, one which they have not chosen, on which they have no grip. The proponents of slavery in the Carolinas had a good case when they showed the conquerors old negro slaves who were bewildered by a freedom which they didn’t know what to do with and who cried for their former masters; these false liberations – though in a certain sense they are inevitable – overwhelm those who are their victims as if they were a new blow of blind fate. What must be done is to furnish the ignorant slave with the means of transcending his situation by means of revolt, to put an end to his ignorance. We know that the problem of the nineteenth-century socialists was precisely to develop a class consciousness in the proletariat; we see in the life of Flora Tristan, for example, how thankless such a task was: what she wanted for the workers had first to be wanted without them. “But what right does one have to want something for others?” asks the conservative, who meanwhile regards the workingman or the native as “a grown-up child” and who does not hesitate to dispose of the child’s will. Indeed, there is nothing more arbitrary than intervening as a stranger in a destiny which is not ours: one of the shocking things about charity – in the civic sense of the word – is that it is practised

from the outside, according to the caprice of the one who distributes it and who is detached from the object. But the cause of freedom is not that of others more than it is mine: it is universally human. If I want the slave to become conscious of his servitude, it is both in order not to be a tyrant myself – for any abstention is complicity, and complicity in this case is tyranny – and in order that new possibilities might be opened to the liberated slave and through him to all men. To want existence, to want to disclose the world, and to want men to be free are one and the same will.

Moreover, the oppressor is lying if he claims that the oppressed positively wants oppression; he merely abstains from not wanting it because he is unaware of even the possibility of rejection. All that an external action can propose is to put the oppressed in the presence of his freedom: then he will decide positively and freely. The fact is that he decides against oppression, and it is then that the movement of emancipation really begins. For if it is true that the cause of freedom is the cause of each one, it is also true that the urgency of liberation is not the same for all; Marx has rightly said that it is only to the oppressed that it appears as immediately necessary. As for us, we do not believe in a literal necessity but in a moral exigency; the oppressed can fulfill his freedom as a man only in revolt, since the essential characteristic of the situation against which he is rebelling is precisely its prohibiting him from any positive development; it is only in social and political struggle that his transcendence passes beyond to the infinite. And certainly the proletarian is no more naturally a moral man than another; he can flee from his freedom, dissipate it, vegetate without desire, and give himself up to an inhuman myth; and the trick of “enlightened” capitalism is to make him forget about his concern with genuine justification, offering him, when he leaves the factory where a mechanical job absorbs his transcendence, diversions in which this transcendence ends by petering out: there you have the politics of the American employing class which catches the worker in the trap of sports, “gadgets,” autos, and frigidaires. On the whole, however, he has fewer temptations of betrayal than the members of the privileged classes because the

satisfying of his passions, the taste for adventure, and the satisfactions of social seriousness are denied him. And in particular, it is also possible for the bourgeois and the intellectual to use their freedom positively at the same time as they can cooperate in the struggle against oppression: their future is not barred. That is what Ponge, for example, suggests when he writes that he is producing "post-revolutionary" literature. The writer, as well as the scientist and the technician, has the possibility of realizing, before the revolution is accomplished, this re-creation of the world which should be the task of every man if freedom were no longer enchained anywhere. Whether or not it is desirable to anticipate the future, whether men have to give up the positive use of their freedom as long as the liberation of all has not yet been achieved, or whether, on the contrary, any human fulfillment serves the cause of man, is a point about which revolutionary politics itself is still hesitating. Even in the Soviet Union itself the relation between the building of the future and the present struggle seems to be defined in very different ways according to the moment and the circumstances. It is also a matter wherein each individual has to invent his solution freely. In any case, we can assert that the oppressed is more totally engaged in the struggle than those who, though at one with him in rejecting his servitude, do not experience it; but also that, on the other hand, every man is affected by this struggle in so essential a way that he can not fulfill himself morally without taking part in it.

The problem is complicated in practice by the fact that today oppression has more than one aspect: the Arabian fellah is oppressed by both the sheiks and the French and English administration; which of the two enemies is to be combated? The interests of the French proletariat are not the same as those of the natives in the colonies: which are to be served? But here the question is political before being moral: we must end by abolishing all suppression; each one must carry on his struggle in connection with that of the other and by integrating it into the general pattern. What order should be followed? What tactics should be adopted? It is a matter of opportunity and efficiency. For each one it also depends upon his

individual situation. It is possible that he may be led to sacrifice temporarily a cause whose success is subordinate to that of a cause whose defense is more urgent; on the other hand, it is possible that one may judge it necessary to maintain the tension of revolt against a situation to which one does not wish to consent at any price: thus, during the war, when Negro leaders in America were asked to drop their own claims for the sake of the general interest, Richard Wright refused; he thought that even in time of war his cause had to be defended. In any case, morality requires that the combatant be not blinded by the goal which he sets up for himself to the point of falling into the fanaticism of seriousness or passion. The cause which he serves must not lock itself up and thus create a new element of separation: through his own struggle he must seek to serve the universal cause of freedom.

At once the oppressor raises an objection: under the pretext of freedom, he says, there you go oppressing me in turn; you deprive me of *my* freedom. It is the argument which the Southern slaveholders opposed to the abolitionists, and we know that the Yankees were so imbued with the principles of an abstract democracy that they did not grant that they had the right to deny the Southern planters the freedom to own slaves; the Civil War broke out with a completely formal pretext. We smile at such scruples; yet today America still recognizes more or less implicitly that Southern whites have the freedom to lynch negroes. And it is the same sophism which is innocently displayed in the newspapers of the P.R.L. (Parti Republicain de la Liberte) and, more or less subtly, in all conservative organs. When a party promises the directing classes that it will defend their freedom, it means quite plainly that it demands that they have the freedom of exploiting the working class. A claim of this kind does not outrage us in the name of abstract justice; but a contradiction is dishonestly concealed there. For a freedom wills itself genuinely only by willing itself as an indefinite movement through the freedom of others; as soon as it withdraws into itself, it denies itself on behalf of some object which it prefers to itself: we know well enough what sort of freedom the P.R.L. demands: it is

property, the feeling of possession, capital, comfort, moral security. We have to respect freedom only when it is intended for freedom, not when it strays, flees itself, and resigns itself. A freedom which is interested only in denying freedom must be denied. And it is not true that the recognition of the freedom of others limits my own freedom: to be free is not to have the power to do anything you like; it is to be able to surpass the given toward an open future; the existence of others as a freedom defines my situation and is even the condition of my own freedom. I am oppressed if I am thrown into prison, but not if I am kept from throwing my neighbor into prison.

Indeed, the oppressor himself is conscious of this sophism; he hardly dares to have recourse to it; rather than make an unvarnished demand for freedom to oppress he is more apt to present himself as the defender of certain values. It is not in his own name that he is fighting, but rather in the name of civilization, of institutions, of monuments, and of virtues which realize objectively the situation which he intends to maintain; he declares that all these things are beautiful and good in themselves; he defends a past which has assumed the icy dignity of being against an uncertain future whose values have not yet been won; this is what is well expressed by the label "conservative." As some people are curators of a museum or a collection of medals, others make themselves the curators of the given world; stressing the sacrifices that are necessarily involved in all change, they side with what has been over against what has not yet been.

It is quite certain that the surpassing of the past toward the future always demands sacrifices; to claim that in destroying an old quarter in order to build new houses on its ruins one is preserving it dialectically is a play on words; no dialectic can restore the old port of Marseilles; the past as something not surpassed, in its flesh and blood presence, has completely vanished. All that a stubborn optimism can claim is that the past does not concern us in this particular and fixed form and that we have sacrificed nothing in sacrificing it; thus, many revolutionaries consider it healthy to refuse

any attachment to the past and to profess to scorn monuments and traditions. A left-wing journalist who was fuming impatiently in a street of Pompeii said, "What are we doing here? We're wasting our time." This attitude is self-confirming; let us turn away from the past, and there no longer remains any trace of it in the present, or for the future; the people of the Middle Ages had so well forgotten antiquity that there was no longer anyone who even had a desire to know something about it. One can live without Greek, without Latin, without cathedrals, and without history. Yes, but there are many other things that one can live without; the tendency of man is not to reduce himself but to increase his power. To abandon the past to the night of facticity is a way of depopulating the world. I would distrust a humanism which was too indifferent to the efforts of the men of former times; if the disclosure of being achieved by our ancestors does not at all move us, why be so interested in that which is taking place today; why wish so ardently for future realizations? To assert the reign of the human is to acknowledge man in the past as well as in the future. The Humanists of the Renaissance are an example of the help to be derived by a movement of liberation from being rooted in the past; no doubt the study of Greek and Latin does not have this living force in every age; but in any case, the fact of having a past is part of the human condition; if the world behind us were bare, we would hardly be able to see anything before us but a gloomy desert. We must try, through our living projects, to turn to our own account that freedom which was undertaken in the past and to integrate it into the present world.

But on the other hand, we know that if the past concerns us, it does so not as a brute fact, but insofar as it has human signification; if this signification can be recognized only by a project which refuses the legacy of the past, then this legacy must be refused; it would be absurd to uphold against man a datum which is precious only insofar as the freedom of man is expressed in it. There is one country where the cult of the past is erected into a system more than anywhere else: it is the Portugal of today; but it is at the cost of a deliberate contempt for man. Salazar has had brand-new castles built, at great expense,

on all the hills where there were ruins standing, and at Obidos he had no hesitation in appropriating for this restoration the funds that were to go to the maternity hospital, which, as a result, had to be closed; on the outskirts of Coimbre where a children's community was to be set up, he spent so much money having the different types of old Portuguese houses reproduced on a reduced scale that barely four children could be lodged in this monstrous village. Dances, songs, local festivals, and the wearing of old regional costumes are encouraged everywhere: they never open a school. Here we see, in its extreme form, the absurdity of a choice which prefers the Thing to Man from whom alone the Thing can receive its value. We may be moved by dances, songs, and regional costumes because these inventions represent the only free accomplishment which was allowed the peasants amidst the hard conditions under which they formerly lived; by means of these creations they tore themselves away from their servile work, transcended their situation, and asserted themselves as men before the beasts of burden. Wherever these festivals still exist spontaneously, where they have retained this character, they have their meaning and their value. But when they are ceremoniously reproduced for the edification of indifferent tourists, they are no more than a boring documentary, even an odious mystification. It is a sophism to want to maintain by coercion things which derive their worth from the fact that men attempted through them to escape from coercion. In like manner, all those who oppose old lace, rugs, peasant coifs, picturesque houses, regional costumes, hand-made cloth, old language, etcetera, to social evolution know very well that they are dishonest: they themselves do not much value the present reality of these things, and most of the time their lives clearly show it. To be sure, they treat those who do not recognize the unconditional value of an Alencon point as ignoramus; but at heart they know that these objects are less precious in themselves than as the manifestation of the civilization which they represent. They are crying up the patience and the submission of industrious hands which were one with their needle as much as they are the lace. We also know that the Nazis made very handsome bindings and lampshades out of human skin.

Thus, oppression can in no way justify itself in the name of the content which it is defending and which it dishonestly sets up as an idol. Bound up with the subjectivity which established it, this content requires its own surpassing. One does not love the past in its living truth if he insists on preserving its hardened and mummified forms. The past is an appeal; it is an appeal toward the future which sometimes can save it only by destroying it. Even though this destruction may be a sacrifice, it would be a lie to deny it: since man wants there to be being, he can not renounce any form of being without regret. But a genuine ethics does not teach us either to sacrifice it or deny it: we must assume it.

The oppressor does not merely try to justify himself as a conserver. Often he tries to invoke future realizations; he speaks in the name of the future. Capitalism sets itself up as the regime which is most favorable to production; the colonist is the only one capable of exploiting the wealth which the native would leave fallow. Oppression tries to defend itself by its utility. But we have seen that it is one of the lies of the serious mind to attempt to give the word "useful" an absolute meaning; nothing is useful if it is not useful to man; nothing is useful to man if the latter is not in a position to define his own ends and values, if he is not free. Doubtless an oppressive regime can achieve constructions which will serve man: they will serve him only from the day that he is free to use them; as long as the reign of the oppressor lasts, none of the benefits of oppression is a real benefit. Neither in the past nor in the future can one prefer a thing to man, who alone can establish the reason for all things.

Finally, the oppressor has a good case for showing that respect for freedom is never without difficulty, and perhaps he may even assert that one can never respect all freedoms at the same time. But that simply means that man must accept the tension of the struggle, that his liberation must actively seek to perpetuate itself, without aiming at an impossible state of equilibrium and rest; this does not mean that he ought to prefer the sleep of slavery to this incessant conquest. Whatever the problems raised for him, the setbacks that he will have

to assume, and the difficulties with which he will have to struggle, he must reject oppression at any cost.

### The Antinomies of Action

As we have seen, if the oppressor were aware of the demands of his own freedom, he himself should have to denounce oppression. But he is dishonest; in the name of the serious or of his passions, of his will for power or of his appetites, he refuses to give up his privileges. In order for a liberating action to be a thoroughly moral action, it would have to be achieved through a conversion of the oppressors: there would then be a reconciliation of all freedoms. But no one any longer dares to abandon himself today to these utopian reveries. We know only too well that we can not count upon a collective conversion. However, by virtue of the fact that the oppressors refuse to co-operate in the affirmation of freedom, they embody, in the eyes of all men of good will, the absurdity of facticity; by calling for the triumph of freedom over facticity, ethics also demands that they be suppressed; and since their subjectivity, by definition, escapes our control, it will be possible to act only on their objective presence; others will here have to be treated like things, with violence; the sad fact of the separation of men will thereby be confirmed. Thus, here is the oppressor oppressed in turn; and the men who do violence to him in their turn become masters, tyrants, and executioners: in revolting, the oppressed are metamorphosed into a blind force, a brutal fatality; the evil which divides the world is carried out in their own hearts. And doubtless it is not a question of backing out of these consequences, for the ill-will of the oppressor imposes upon each one the alternative of being the enemy of the oppressed if he is not that of their tyrant; evidently, it is necessary to choose to sacrifice the one who is an enemy of man; but the fact is that one finds himself forced to treat certain men as things in order to win the freedom of all.

A freedom which is occupied in denying freedom is itself so outrageous that the outrageousness of the violence which one practices against it is almost cancelled out: hatred, indignation, and

anger (which even the Marxist cultivates, despite the cold impartiality of the doctrine) wipe out all scruples. But the oppressor would not be so strong if he did not have accomplices among the oppressed themselves; mystification is one of the forms of oppression; ignorance is a situation in which man may be enclosed as narrowly as in a prison; as we have already said, every individual may practice his freedom inside his world, but not everyone has the means of rejecting, even by doubt, the values, taboos, and prescriptions by which he is surrounded; doubtless, respectful minds take the object of their respect for their own; in this sense they are *responsible* for it, as they are responsible for their presence in the world: but they are not *guilty* if their adherence is not a resignation of their freedom. When a young sixteen-year old Nazi died crying, "Heil Hitler!" he was not guilty, and it was not he whom we hated but his masters. The desirable thing would be to re-educate this misled youth; it would be necessary to expose the mystification and to put the men who are its victims in the presence of their freedom. But the urgency of the struggle forbids this slow labor. We are obliged to destroy not only the oppressor but also those who serve him, whether they do so out of ignorance or out of constraint.

As we have also seen, the situation of the world is so complex that one can not fight everywhere at the same time and for everyone. In order to win an urgent victory, one has to give up the idea, at least temporarily, of serving certain valid causes; one may even be brought to the point of fighting against them. Thus, during the course of the last war, no Anti-fascist could have wanted the revolts of the natives in the British Empire to be successful; on the contrary, these revolts were supported by the Fascist regimes; and yet, we can not blame those who, considering their emancipation to be the more urgent action, took advantage of the situation to obtain it. Thus, it is possible, and often it even happens, that one finds himself obliged to oppress and kill men who are pursuing goals whose validity one acknowledges himself.

But that is not the worst thing to be said for violence. It not only forces us to sacrifice the men who are in our way, but also those who are fighting on our side, and even ourselves. Since we can conquer our enemies only by acting upon their facticity, by reducing them to things, we have to make ourselves things; in this struggle in which wills are forced to confront each other through their bodies, the bodies of our allies, like those of our opponents are exposed to the same brutal hazard: they will be wounded, killed, or starved. Every war, every revolution, demands the sacrifice of a generation, of a collectivity, by those who undertake it. And even outside of periods of crisis when blood flows, the permanent possibility of violence can constitute between nations and classes a state of veiled warfare in which individuals are sacrificed in a permanent way.

Thus one finds himself in the presence of the paradox that no action can be generated for man without its being immediately generated against men. This obvious truth, which is universally known, is, however, so bitter that the first concern of a doctrine of action is ordinarily to mask this element of failure that is involved in any undertaking. The parties of oppression beg the question; they deny the value of what they sacrifice in such a way that they find that they are *sacrificing* nothing. Passing dishonestly from the serious to nihilism, they set up both the unconditioned value of their end and the insignificance of the men whom they are using as instruments. High as it may be, the number of victims is always measurable; and each one taken one by one is never anything but an individual: yet, through time and space, the triumph of the cause embraces the infinite, it interests the whole collectivity. In order to deny the outrage it is enough to deny the importance of the individual, even though it be at the cost of this collectivity: *it* is everything, *he* is only a zero.

In one sense the individual, as a matter of fact, is not very much, and we can understand the misanthrope who in 1939 declared: "After all, when you look at people one by one, it doesn't seem so awful a thing to make war upon them." Reduced to pure facticity, congealed

in his immanence, cut off from his future, deprived of his transcendence and of the world which that transcendence discloses, a man no longer appears as anything more than a thing among things which can be subtracted from the collectivity of other things without its leaving upon the earth any trace of its absence. Multiply this paltry existence by thousands of copies and its insignificance remains; mathematics also teaches us that zero multiplied by any finite number remains zero. It is even possible that the wretchedness of each element is only further affirmed by this futile expansion. Horror is sometimes self-destructive before the photographs of the charnel-houses of Buchenwald and Dachau and of the ditches strewn with bones; it takes on the aspect of indifference; that decomposed, that animal flesh seems so essentially doomed to decay that one can no longer even regret that it has fulfilled its destiny; it is when a man is alive that his death appears to be an outrage, but a corpse has the stupid tranquillity of trees and stones: those who have done it say that it is easy to walk on a corpse and still easier to walk over a pile of corpses; and it is the same reason that accounts for the callousness described by those deportees who escaped death: through sickness, pain, hunger, and death, they no longer saw their comrades and themselves as anything more than an animal horde whose life or desires were no longer justified by anything, whose very revolts were only the agitations of animals. In order to remain capable of perceiving man through these humiliated bodies one had to be sustained by political faith, intellectual pride, or Christian charity. That is why the Nazis were so systematically relentless in casting into abjection the men they wanted to destroy: the disgust which the victims felt in regard to themselves stifled the voice of revolt and justified the executioners in their own eyes. **All oppressive regimes become stronger through the degradation of the oppressed.** In Algeria I have seen any number of colonists appease their conscience by the contempt in which they held the Arabs who were crushed with misery: the more miserable the latter were, the more contemptible they seemed, so much so that there was never any room for remorse. And the truth is that certain tribes in the south were so ravaged by disease and famine that one could no longer feel either rebellious or

hopeful regarding them; rather, one wished for the death of those unhappy creatures who have been reduced to so elemental an animality that even the maternal instinct has been suppressed in them. Yet, with all this sordid resignation, there were children who played and laughed; and their smile exposed the lie of their oppressors: it was an appeal and a promise; it projected a future before the child, a man's future. If, in all oppressed countries, a child's face is so moving, it is not that the child is more moving or that he has more of a right to happiness than the others: it is that he is the living affirmation of human transcendence: he is on the watch, he is an eager hand held out to the world, he is a hope, a project. The trick of tyrants is to enclose a man in the immanence of his facticity and to try to forget that man is always, as Heidegger puts it, "infinitely more than what he would be if he were reduced to being what he is;" **man is a being of the distances, a movement toward the future, a project.** The tyrant asserts himself as a transcendence; he considers others as pure immanences: he thus arrogates to himself the right to treat them like cattle. We see the sophism on which his conduct is based: of the ambiguous condition which is that of all men, he retains for himself the only aspect of a transcendence which is capable of justifying itself; for the others, the contingent and unjustified aspect of immanence.

But if that kind of contempt for man is convenient, it is also dangerous; the feeling of abjection can confirm men in a hopeless resignation but can not incite them to the struggle and sacrifice which is consented to with their life; this was seen in the time of the Roman decadence when men lost their zest for life and the readiness to risk it. In any case, the tyrant himself does not openly set up this contempt as a universal principle: it is the Jew, the negro, or the native whom he encloses in his immanence; with his subordinates and his soldiers he uses different language. For it is quite clear that if the individual is a pure zero, the sum of those zeros which make up the collectivity is also a zero: no undertaking has any importance, no defeat as well as no victory. In order to appeal to the devotion of his troops, the chief or the authoritarian party will utilize a truth which

is the opposite of the one which sanctions their brutal oppression: namely, that the value of the individual is asserted only in his surpassing. This is one of the aspects of the doctrine of Hegel which the dictatorial regimes readily make use of. And it is a point at which fascist ideology and Marxist ideology converge. A doctrine which aims at the liberation of man evidently can not rest on a contempt for the individual; but it can propose to him no other salvation than his subordination to the collectivity. **The finite is nothing if it is not its transition to the infinite; the death of an individual is not a failure if it is integrated into a project which surpasses the limits of life,** the substance of this life being outside of the individual himself, in the class, in the socialist State; if the individual is taught to consent to his sacrifice, the latter is abolished as such, and the soldier who has renounced himself in favor of his cause will die joyfully; in fact, that is how the young Hitlerians died.

We know how many edifying speeches this philosophy has inspired: it is by losing oneself that one finds himself, by dying that one fulfills his life, by accepting servitude that one realizes his freedom; all leaders of men preach in this vein. And if there are any who refuse to heed this language, they are wrong, they are cowards: as such, they are worthless, they aren't worth anyone's bothering with them. **The brave man dies gaily, of his own free will; the one who rejects death deserves only to die. There you have the problem elegantly resolved.**

But one may ask whether this convenient solution is not self-contesting. In Hegel the individual is only an abstract moment in the History of absolute Mind. This is explained by the first intuition of the system which, identifying the real and the rational, empties the human world of its sensible thickness; if the truth of the here and now is only Space and Time, if the truth of one's cause is its passage into the other, then the attachment to the individual substance of life is evidently an error, an inadequate attitude. The essential moment of Hegelian ethics is the moment when consciousnesses recognize one another; in this operation the other is recognized as identical

with me, which means that in myself it is the universal truth of my self which alone is recognized; so individuality is denied, and it can no longer reappear except on the natural and contingent plane; moral salvation will lie in my surpassing toward that other who is equal to myself and who in turn will surpass himself toward another. Hegel himself recognizes that if this passage continued indefinitely, **Totality would never be achieved, the real would peter out in the same measure: one can not, without absurdity, indefinitely sacrifice each generation to the following one; human history would then be only an endless succession of negations which would never return to the positive; all action would be destruction and life would be a vain flight.** We must admit that there will be a recovery of the real and that all sacrifices will find their positive form within the absolute Mind. But this does not work without some difficulty. The Mind is a subject; but *who* is a subject? After Descartes how can we ignore the fact that subjectivity radically signifies separation? And if it is admitted, at the cost of a contradiction, that *the* subject will be *the* men of the future reconciled, it must be clearly recognized that the men of today who turn out to have been the *substance* of the real, and not *subjects*, remain excluded forever from this reconciliation. Furthermore, even Hegel retreats from the idea of this motionless future; since Mind is restlessness, the dialectic of struggle and conciliation can never be stopped: the future which it envisages is not the perpetual peace of Kant but an indefinite state of war. It declares that this war will no longer appear as a temporary evil in which each individual makes a gift of himself to the State; but it is precisely at this point that there is a bit of sleight-of-hand: for *why* would he agree to this gift since the State can not be the achieving of the real Totality recovering itself? The whole system seems like a huge mystification, since it subordinates all its moments to an end term whose coming it dares not set up; the individual renounces himself; but no reality in favor of which he can renounce himself is ever affirmed or recovered. Through all this learned dialectic we finally come back to the sophism which we exposed: **if the individual is nothing, society can not be something. Take his substance away from him, and the State has no more substance; if he has nothing to**

sacrifice, there is nothing before him to sacrifice to. Hegelian fullness immediately passes into the nothingness of absence. And the very grandeur of that failure makes this truth shine forth: only the subject can justify his own existence; no external subject, no object, can bring him salvation from the outside. He can not be regarded as a nothing, since the consciousness of all things is within him.

Thus, nihilistic pessimism and rationalistic optimism fail in their effort to juggle away the bitter truth of sacrifice: they also eliminate all reasons for wanting it. Someone told a young invalid who wept because she had to leave her home, her occupations, and her whole past life, "Get cured. The rest has no importance." "But if nothing has any importance," she answered, "what good is it to get cured?" She was right. In order for this world to have any importance, in order for our undertaking to have a meaning and to be worthy of sacrifices, we must affirm the concrete and particular thickness of this world and the individual reality of our projects and ourselves. This is what democratic societies understand; they strive to confirm citizens in the feeling of their individual value; the whole ceremonious apparatus of baptism, marriage, and burial is the collectivity's homage to the individual; and the rites of justice seek to manifest society's respect for each of its members considered in his particularity. After or during a period of violence when men are treated like objects, one is astonished, even irritated, at seeing human life rediscover, in certain cases, a sacred character. Why those hesitations of the courts, those long drawn-out trials, since men died by the million, like animals, since the very ones being judged coldly massacred them? The reason is that once the period of crisis, in which the democracies themselves, whether they liked it or not, had to resort to blind violence, has passed, they aim to re-establish the individual within his rights; more than ever they must restore to their members the sense of their dignity, the sense of the dignity of each man, taken one by one; the soldier must become a citizen again so that the city may continue to subsist as such, may continue to deserve one's dedicating oneself to it.

But if the individual is set up as a unique and irreducible value, the word sacrifice regains all its meaning; what a man loses in renouncing his plans, his future, and his life no longer appears as a negligible thing. Even if he decides that in order to justify his life he must consent to limiting its course, even if he accepts dying, there is a wrench at the heart of this acceptance, **for freedom demands both that it recover itself as an absolute and that it prolong its movement indefinitely: it is through this indefinite movement that it desires to come back to itself and to confirm itself;** now, death puts an end to his drive; the hero can transcend death toward a future fulfillment, but he will not be present in that future; this must be understood if one wishes to restore to heroism its true worth: it is neither natural nor easy; the hero may overcome his regret and carry out his sacrifice; the latter is none the less an absolute renunciation. The death of those to whom we are attached by particular ties will also be consented to as an individual and irreducible misfortune. A collectivist conception of man does not concede a valid existence to such sentiments as love, tenderness, and friendship; the abstract identity of individuals merely authorizes a comradeship between them by means of which each one is likened to each of the others. In marching, in choral singing, in common work and struggle, all the others appear as the same; nobody ever dies. On the contrary, if individuals recognize themselves in their differences, individual relations are established among them, and each one becomes irreplaceable for a few others. And violence does not merely provoke in the world the wrench of the sacrifice to which one has consented; it is also undergone in revolt and refusal. Even the one who desires a victory and who knows that it has to be paid for will wonder: why with *my* blood rather than with another's? Why is it my son who is dead? And we have seen that every struggle obliges us to sacrifice people whom our victory does not concern, people who, in all honesty, reject it as a cataclysm: these people will die in astonishment, anger or despair. Undergone as a misfortune, violence appears as a crime to the one who practices it. That is why Saint-Just, **who believed in the individual and who knew that all authority is violence, said with somber lucidity, "No one governs innocently."**

We may well assume that not all those who govern have the courage to make such a confession; and furthermore it might be dangerous for them to make it too loudly. They try to mask the crime from themselves; at least they try to conceal it from the notice of those who submit to their law. If they can not totally deny it, they attempt to justify it. The most radical justification would be to demonstrate that it is necessary: it then ceases to be a crime, it becomes fatality. Even if an end is posited as necessary, the contingency of the means renders the chief's decisions arbitrary, and each individual suffering appears as unjustified: why this bloody revolution instead of slow reforms? And who will dare to designate the victim who is anonymously demanded by the general plan? On the contrary, if only one way shows itself to be possible, if the unrolling of history is fatal, there is no longer any place for the anguish of choice, or for regret, or for outrage; revolt can no longer surge up in any heart. This is what makes historical materialism so reassuring a doctrine; the troublesome idea of a subjective caprice or an objective chance is thereby eliminated. The thought and the voice of the directors merely reflect the fatal exigencies of History. But in order that this faith be living and efficacious, it is necessary that no reflection mediatize the subjectivity of the chiefs and make it appear as such; if the chief considers that he does not simply reflect the given situation but that he is interpreting it, he becomes a prey to anguish: who am I to believe in myself? And if the soldier's eyes open, he too asks: who is he to command me? Instead of a prophet, he sees nothing more than a tyrant. That is why every authoritarian party regards thought as a danger and reflection as a crime; it is by means of thought that crime appears as such in the world. This is one of the meanings of Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*. Roubatchov easily slips into confession because he feels that hesitation and doubt are the most radical, the most unpardonable of faults; they undermine the world of objectivity much more than does an act of capricious disobedience. Yet, however cruel the yoke may be, in spite of the purges, murders, and deportations, every regime has opponents: there are reflection, doubt, and contestation. And even if the opponent is in the wrong, his error brings to light a truth, namely,

that there is a place in this world for error and subjectivity; whether he is right or wrong, he triumphs; he shows that the men who are in power may also be mistaken. And furthermore, the latter know it; they know that they hesitate and that their decisions are risky. The doctrine of necessity is much more a weapon than a faith; and if they use it, they do so because they know well enough that the soldier may act otherwise than he does, otherwise than the way they want him to, that he may disobey; they know well enough that he is free and that they are fettering his freedom. It is the first sacrifice that they impose upon him: **in order to achieve the liberation of men he has to give up his own freedom, even his freedom of thought.** In order to mask the violence, what they do is to have recourse to a new violence which even invades his mind.

Very well, replies the partisan who is sure of his aims, but this violence is useful. And the justification which he here invokes is that which, in the most general way, inspires and legitimizes all action. From conservatives to revolutionaries, through idealistic and moral vocabularies or realistic and positive ones, **the outrageousness of violence is excused in the name of utility.** It does not much matter that the action is not fatally commanded by anterior events as long as it is called for by the proposed end; this end sets up the means which are subordinated to it; and thanks to this subordination, one can perhaps not avoid sacrifice but one can legitimize it: this is what is important to the man of action; like Saint-Just, he accepts the loss of his innocence. It is the arbitrariness of the crime that is repugnant to him more than the crime itself. If the sacrifices which have been assented to find their rational place within the enterprise, one escapes from the anguish of decision and from remorse. But one has to win out; defeat would change the murders and destruction into unjustified outrage, since they would have been carried out in vain; but victory gives meaning and utility to all the misfortunes which have helped bring it about.

Such a position would be solid and satisfactory if the word *useful* had an absolute meaning in itself; as we have seen, the

characteristic of the spirit of seriousness is precisely to confer a meaning upon it **by raising the Thing or the Cause to the dignity of an unconditioned end**. The only problem then raised is a technical problem; the means will be chosen according to their effectiveness, their speed, and their economy; it is simply a question of measuring the relationships of the factors of time, cost, and probability of success. Furthermore, in war-time discipline spares the subordinates the problems of such calculations; they concern only the staff. The soldier does not call into question either the aim or the means of attaining it: he obeys without any discussion. However, what distinguishes war and politics from all other techniques is that the material that is employed is a human material. Now human efforts and lives can no more be treated as blind instruments than human work can be treated as simple merchandise; **at the same time as he is a means for attaining an end, man is himself an end**. The word *useful* requires a complement, and there can be only one: man himself. And the most disciplined soldier would mutiny if skillful propaganda did not persuade him that he is dedicating himself to the cause of man: to his cause.

But is the cause of Man that of each man? That is what utilitarian ethics has been striving to demonstrate since Hegel; if one wishes to give the word *useful* a universal and absolute meaning, it is always a question of reabsorbing each man into the bosom of mankind; it is said that despite the weaknesses of the flesh and that particular fear which each one experiences in the face of his particular death, the real interest of each one is mingled with the general interest. And it is true that each is bound to all; but that is precisely the ambiguity of his condition: in his surpassing toward others, each one exists absolutely as for himself; each is interested in the liberation of all, but as a separate existence engaged in his own projects. So much so that the terms “useful to Man,” “useful to this man,” do not overlap. Universal, absolute man exists nowhere. From this angle, we again come upon the same antinomy: the only justification of sacrifice is its utility; but the useful is what serves Man. Thus, in order to serve

some men we must do disservice to others. By what principle are we to choose between them?

It must again be called to mind that the supreme end at which man must aim is his freedom, which alone is capable of establishing the value of every end; thus, comfort, happiness, all relative goods which human projects define, will be subordinated to this absolute condition of realization. **The freedom of a single man must count more than a cotton or rubber harvest;** although this principle is not respected in fact, it is usually recognized theoretically. But what makes the problem so difficult is that it is a matter of choosing between the negation of one freedom or another: every war supposes a discipline, every revolution a dictatorship, every political move a certain amount of lying; action implies all forms of enslaving, from murder to mystification. Is it therefore absurd in every case? Or, in spite of everything, are we able to find, within the very outrage that it implies, reasons for wanting one thing rather than another?

One generally takes numerical considerations into account by a strange compromise which clearly shows that every action treats men both as a means and as an end, as an external object and as an inwardness; it is better to save the lives of ten men than of only one. Thus, one treats man as an end, for to set up quantity as a value is to set up the positive value of each unit; but it is setting it up as a quantifiable value, thus, as an externality. I have known a Kantian rationalist who passionately maintained that it is as immoral to choose the death of a single man as to let ten thousand die; he was right in the sense that in each murder the outrage is total; ten thousand dead – there are never ten thousand copies of a single death; no multiplication is relevant to subjectivity. **But he forgot that for the one who had the decision to make men are given, nevertheless, as objects that can be counted;** it is therefore logical, though this logic implies an outrageous absurdity, to prefer the salvation of the greater number. Moreover, this position of the problem is rather abstract, for one rarely bases a choice on pure quantity. Those men among whom one hesitates have functions in

society. The general who is sparing of the lives of his soldiers saves them as human material that it is useful to save for tomorrow's battles or for the reconstruction of the country; and he sometimes condemns to death thousands of civilians whose fate he is not concerned with in order to spare the lives of a hundred soldiers or ten specialists. An extreme case is the one David Rousset describes in *The Days of Our Death*: the S.S. obliged the responsible members of the concentration camps to designate which prisoners were to go to the gas chambers. The politicians agreed to assume this responsibility because they thought that they had a valid principle of selection: they protected the politicians of their party because the lives of these men who were devoted to a cause which they thought was just seemed to them to be the most useful to preserve. We know that the communists have been widely accused of this partiality; however, since one could in no way escape the atrocity of these massacres, the only thing to do was to try, as far as possible, to rationalize it.

It seems as if we have hardly advanced, for we come back, in the end, to the statement that what appears as useful is to sacrifice the less useful men to the more useful. But even this shift from useful to useful will enlighten us: **the complement of the word *useful* is the word *man*, but it is also the word *future*.** It is man insofar as he is, according to the formula of Ponge, "the future of man." Indeed, cut off from his transcendence, reduced to the facticity of his presence, an individual is nothing; it is by his project that he fulfills himself, by the end at which he aims that he justifies himself; thus, this justification is always to come. Only the future can take the present for its own and keep it alive by surpassing it. A choice will become possible in the light of the future, which is the meaning of tomorrow because the present appears as the facticity which must be transcended toward freedom. No action is conceivable without this sovereign affirmation of the future. But we still have to agree upon what underlies this word.

## The Present and the Future

The word *future* has two meanings corresponding to the two aspects of the ambiguous condition of man which is lack of being and which is existence; it alludes to both being and existence. When I envisage my future, I consider that movement which, prolonging my existence of today, will fulfill my present projects and will surpass them toward new ends: the future is the definite direction of a particular transcendence and it is so closely bound up with the present that it composes with it a single temporal form; this is the future which Heidegger considered as a reality which is given at each moment. But through the centuries men have dreamed of another future in which it might be granted them to retrieve themselves as beings in Glory, Happiness, or Justice; this future did not prolong the present; it came down upon the world like a cataclysm announced by signs which cut the continuity of time: by a Messiah, by meteors, by the trumpets of the Last Judgment. By transporting the kingdom of God to heaven, Christians have almost stripped it of its temporal character, although it was promised to the believer only at the end of his life. It was the anti-Christian humanism of the eighteenth century which brought the myth down to earth again. Then, through the idea of progress, an idea of the future was elaborated in which its two aspects fused: **the future appeared both as the meaning of our transcendence and as the immobility of being**; it is human, terrestrial, and the resting-place of things. It is in this form that it is hesitantly reflected in the systems of Hegel and of Comte. It is in this form that it is so often invoked today as a unity of the World or as a finished socialist State. In both cases the Future appears as both the infinite and as Totality, as number and as unity of conciliation; it is the abolition of the negative, it is fullness, happiness. One might surmise that any sacrifice already made might be claimed in its name. However great the quantity of men sacrificed today, the quantity that will profit by their sacrifice is infinitely greater; on the other hand, in the face of the positivity of the future, the present is only the negative which must be eliminated as such: only by dedicating itself to this positivity can the negative henceforth return to the positive. **The present is the transitory existence which is made in order to be abolished: it retrieves itself only by transcending itself toward the**

**permanence of future being;** it is only as an instrument, as a means, it is only by its efficacy with regard to the coming of the future that the present is validly realized: reduced to itself it is nothing, one may dispose of it as he pleases. **That is the ultimate meaning of the formula: the end justifies the means: all means are authorized by their very indifference.** Thus, some serenely think that the present oppression has no importance if, through it, the World can be fulfilled as such: then, within the harmonious equilibrium of work and wealth, oppression will be wiped out by itself. Others serenely think that the present dictatorship of a party with its lies and violence has no importance if, by means of it, the socialist State is realized: arbitrariness and crime will then disappear forever from the face of the earth. And still others think more sloppily that the shilly-shallyings and the compromises have no importance since the future will turn out well and, in some way or other, will muddle along into victory. Those who project themselves toward a Future-Thing and submerge their freedom in it find the tranquillity of the serious.

However, we have seen that, despite the requirements of his system, even Hegel does not dare delude himself with the idea of a stationary future; he admits that, mind being restlessness, the struggle will never cease. Marx did not consider the coming of the socialist state as an absolute result, but as the end of a pre-history on the basis of which real history begins. However, it would be sufficient, in order for the myth of the future to be valid, for this history to be conceivable as a harmonious development where reconciled men would fulfill themselves as a pure positivity; but this dream is not permitted since man is originally a negativity. No social upheaval, no moral conversion can eliminate this lack which is in his heart; it is by making himself a lack of being that man exists, and positive existence is this lack assumed but not eliminated; we can not establish upon existence an abstract wisdom which, turning itself away from being, would aim at only the harmony itself of the existants: for it is then the absolute silence of the in-itself which would close up around this negation of negativity; without this particular movement which thrusts him toward the future man

would not exist. But then one can not imagine any reconciliation of transcendences: they do not have the indifferent docility of a pure abstraction; they are concrete and concretely compete with others for being. The world which they reveal is a battle-field where there is no neutral ground and which cannot be divided up into parcels: for each individual project is asserted through the world as a whole. The fundamental ambiguity of the human condition will always open up to men the possibility of opposing choices; there will always be within them the desire to be that being of whom they have made themselves a lack, **the flight from the anguish of freedom; the plane of hell, of struggle, will never be eliminated; freedom will never be given; it will always have to be won:** that is what Trotsky was saying when he envisaged the future as a permanent revolution. Thus, there is a fallacy hidden in that abuse of language which all parties make use of today to justify their politics when they declare that the world is still at war. If one means by that that the struggle is not over, that the world is a prey to opposed interests which affront each other violently, he is speaking the truth; but he also means that such a situation is abnormal and calls for abnormal behavior; **the politics that it involves can impugn every moral principle, since it has only a provisional form: later on we shall act in accordance with truth and justice.** To the idea of present war there is opposed that of a future peace when man will again find, along with a stable situation, the possibility of a morality. But the truth is that if division and violence define war, the world has always been at war and always will be; **if man is waiting for universal peace in order to establish his existence validly, he will wait indefinitely: there will never be any *other* future.**

It is possible that some may challenge this assertion as being based upon debatable ontological presuppositions; it should at least be recognized that this harmonious future is only an uncertain dream and that in any case it is not ours. Our hold on the future is limited; the movement of expansion of existence requires that we strive at every moment to amplify it; but where it stops our future stops too; beyond, there is nothing more because nothing more is disclosed. From that formless night we can draw no justification of our acts, it

condemns them with the same indifference; wiping out today's errors and defeats, it will also wipe out its triumphs; it can be chaos or death as well as paradise: perhaps men will one day return to barbarism, perhaps one day the earth will no longer be anything but an icy planet. In this perspective all moments are lost in the indistinctness of nothingness and being. Man ought not entrust the care of his salvation to this uncertain and foreign future: it is up to him to assure it within his own existence; this existence is conceivable, as we have said, only as an affirmation of the future, but of a human future, a finite future.

It is difficult today to safeguard this sense of finiteness. The Greek cities and the Roman republic were able to will themselves in their finiteness because the infinite which invested them was for them only darkness; they died because of this ignorance, but they also lived by it. Today, however, we are having a hard time living because we are so bent on outwitting death. We are aware that the whole world is interested in each of our undertakings and this spatial enlargement of our projects also governs their temporal dimension; by a paradoxical symmetry, whereas an individual accords great value to one day of his life, and a city to one year, the interests of the World are computed in centuries; the greater the human density that one envisages, the more the viewpoint of externality wins over that of internality, and the idea of externality carries with it that of quantity. Thus, the scales of measurement have changed; space and time have expanded about us: today it is a small matter that a million men and a century seem to us only a provisional moment; yet, the individual is not touched by this transformation, his life keeps the same rhythm, his death does not retreat before him; he extends his control of the world by instruments which enable him to devour distances and to multiply the output of his effort in time; but he is always only one. However, instead of accepting his limits, he tries to do away with them. He aspires to act upon everything and by knowing everything. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there developed the dream of a universal science which, manifesting the solidarity of the parts of the whole also admitted a universal power; it was a dream

“dreamed by reason,” as Valéry puts it, but which was none the less hollow, like all dreams. For a scientist who would aspire to know everything about a phenomenon would dissolve it within the totality; and a man who would aspire to act upon the totality of the Universe would see the meaning of all action vanish. Just as the infinity spread out before my gaze contracts above my head into a blue ceiling, so my transcendence heaps up in the distance the opaque thickness of the future; but between sky and earth there is a perceptual field with its forms and colors; and it is in the interval which separates me today from an unforeseeable future that there are meanings and ends toward which to direct my acts. As soon as one introduces the presence of the finite individual into the world, a presence without which there is no world, finite forms stand out through time and space. And in reverse, though a landscape is not only a transition but a particular object, an event is not only a passage but a particular reality. If one denies with Hegel the concrete thickness of the here and now in favor of universal space-time, if one denies the separate consciousness in favor of Mind, one misses with Hegel the truth of the world.

It is no more necessary to regard History as a rational totality than to regard the Universe as such. Man, mankind, the universe, and history are, in Sartre’s expression, “detotalized totalities,” that is, separation does not exclude relation, nor vice-versa. Society exists only by means of the existence of particular individuals; likewise, human adventures stand out against the background of time, each finite to each, though they are all open to the infinity of the future and their individual forms thereby imply each other without destroying each other. A conception of this kind does not contradict that of a historical unintelligibility; for it is not true that the mind has to choose between the contingent absurdity of the discontinuous and the rationalistic necessity of the continuous; on the contrary, it is part of its function to make a multiplicity of coherent ensembles stand out against the unique background of the world and, inversely, to comprehend these ensembles in the perspective of an ideal unity of the world. Without raising the question of historical comprehension

and causality it is enough to recognize the presence of intelligible sequences within temporal forms so that forecasts and consequently action may be possible. In fact, whatever may be the philosophy we adhere to, whether our uncertainty manifests an objective and fundamental contingency or whether it expresses our subjective ignorance in the face of a rigorous necessity, the practical attitude remains the same; we must decide upon the opportuneness of an act and attempt to measure its effectiveness without knowing all the factors that are present. Just as the scientist, in order to know a phenomenon, does not wait for the light of completed knowledge to break upon it; on the contrary, in illuminating the phenomenon, he helps establish the knowledge; in like manner, the man of action, in order to make a decision, will not wait for a perfect knowledge to prove to him the necessity of a certain choice; he must first choose and thus help fashion history. A choice of this kind is no more arbitrary than a hypothesis; it excludes neither reflection nor even method; but it is also free, and it implies risks that must be assumed as such. The movement of the mind, whether it be called thought or will, always starts up in the darkness. And at bottom it matters very little, practically speaking, whether there is a Science of history or not, since this Science can come to light only at the end of the future and since at each particular moment we must, in any case, maneuver in a state of doubt. The communists themselves admit that it is subjectively possible for them to be mistaken despite the strict dialectic of History. The latter is not revealed to them today in its finished form; they are obliged to foresee its development, and this foresight may be erroneous. Thus, from the political and tactical point of view there will be no difference between a doctrine of pure dialectical necessity and a doctrine which leaves room for contingency; the difference is of a moral order. For, in the first case one admits a retrieval of each moment in the future, and thus one does not aspire to justify it by itself; in the second case, each undertaking, involving only a finite future, must be lived in its finiteness and considered as an absolute which no unknown time will ever succeed in saving. In fact, the one who asserts the unity of history also recognizes that distinct ensembles stand out within it;

and the one who emphasizes the particularity of these ensembles admits that they all project against a single horizon; just as for all there exist both individuals and a collectivity; the affirmation of the collectivity over against the individual is opposed, not on the plane of fact, but on the moral plane, to the assertion of a collectivity of individuals each existing for himself. The case is the same in what concerns time and its moments, and just as we believe that by denying each individual one by one, one eliminates the collectivity, we think that if man gives himself up to an indefinite pursuit of the future he will lose his existence without ever recovering it; he then resembles a madman who runs after his shadow. **The means, it is said, will be justified by the end; but it is the means which define it, and if it is contradicted at the moment that it is set up, the whole enterprise sinks into absurdity.** In this way the attitude of England in regard to Spain, Greece, and Palestine is defended with the pretext that she must take up position against the Russian menace in order to save, along with her own existence, her civilization and the values of democracy; **but a democracy which defends itself only by acts of oppression equivalent to those of authoritarian regimes, is precisely denying all these values; whatever the virtues of a civilization may be, it immediately belies them if it buys them by means of injustice and tyranny.** Inversely, **if the justifying end is thrown ahead to the farthest end of a mythical future, it is no longer a reflection upon the means; being nearer and clearer, the means itself becomes the goal aimed at;** it blocks the horizon without, however, being deliberately wanted. The triumph of Russia is proposed as a means of liberating the international proletariat; but has it not become an absolute end for all Stalinists? **The end justifies the means only if it remains present, if it is completely disclosed in the course of the present enterprise.**

And as a matter of fact, if it is true that men seek in the future a guarantee of their success, a negation of their failures, it is true that they also feel the need of denying the indefinite flight of time and of holding their present between their hands. **Existence must be asserted in the present if one does not want all life to be defined as**

an escape toward nothingness. That is the reason societies institute festivals whose role is to stop the movement of transcendence, to set up the end as an end. The hours following the liberation of Paris, for example, were an immense collective festival exalting the happy and absolute end of that particular history which was precisely the occupation of Paris. There were at the moment worried spirits who were already surpassing the present toward future difficulties; they refused to rejoice under the pretext that new problems were going to come up immediately; but this ill-humor was met with only among those who had very slight wish to see the Germans defeated. All those who had made this combat their combat, even if only by the sincerity of their hopes, also regarded the victory as an absolute victory, whatever the future might be. Nobody was so naive as not to know that unhappiness would soon find other forms; but this particular unhappiness was wiped off the earth, absolutely. That is the modern meaning of the festival, private as well as public. Existence attempts in the festival to confirm itself positively as existence. That is why, as Bataille has shown, it is characterized by destruction; the ethics of being is the ethics of saving: by storing up, one aims at the stationary plenitude of the in-itself, existence, on the contrary, is consumption; it makes itself only by destroying; the festival carries out this negative movement in order to indicate clearly its independence in relationship to the thing: one eats, drinks, lights fires, breaks things, and spends time and money; one spends them for nothing. The spending is also a matter of establishing a communication of the existants, for it is by the movement of recognition which goes from one to the other that existence is confirmed; in songs, laughter, dances, eroticism, and drunkenness one seeks both an exaltation of the moment and a complicity with other men. But the tension of existence realized as a pure negativity can not maintain itself for long; it must be immediately engaged in a new undertaking, it must dash off toward the future. The moment of detachment, the pure affirmation of the subjective present are only abstractions; the joy becomes exhausted, drunkenness subsides into fatigue, and one finds himself with his hands empty because one can never possess the present: that is what gives festivals their pathetic and deceptive

character. One of art's roles is to fix this passionate assertion of existence in a more durable way: the festival is at the origin of the theatre, music, the dance, and poetry. In telling a story, in depicting it, one makes it exist in its particularity with its beginning and its end, its glory or its shame; and this is the way it actually must be lived. In the festival, in art, men express their need to feel that they exist absolutely. They must really fulfill this wish. What stops them is that as soon as they give the word "end" its double meaning of goal and fulfillment they clearly perceive this ambiguity of their condition, which is the most fundamental of all: that every living movement is a sliding toward death. But if they are willing to look it in the face they also discover that every movement toward death is life. In the past people cried out, "The king is dead, long live the king;" thus the present must die so that it may live; existence must not deny this death which it carries in its heart; it must assert itself as an absolute in its very finiteness; man fulfills himself within the transitory or not at all. He must regard his undertakings as finite and will them absolutely.

It is obvious that this finiteness is not that of the pure instant; we have said that the future was the meaning and the substance of all action; the limits can not be marked out *a priori*; there are projects which define the future of a day or of an hour; and there are others which are inserted into structures capable of being developed through one, two, or several centuries, and thereby they have a concrete hold on one or two or several centuries. When one fights for the emancipation of oppressed natives, or the socialist revolution, he is obviously aiming at a long range goal; and he is still aiming at it concretely, beyond his own death, through the movement, the league, the institutions, or the party that he has helped set up. What we maintain is that one must not expect that this goal be justified as a point of departure of a new future; insofar as we no longer have a hold on the time which will flow beyond its coming, we must not expect anything of that time for which we have worked; other men will have to live its joys and sorrows. As for us, the goal must be considered as an end; we have to justify it on the basis of our freedom

which has projected it, by the ensemble of the movement which ends in its fulfillment. The tasks we have set up for ourselves and which, though exceeding the limits of our lives, are ours, must find their meaning in themselves and not in a mythical Historical end.

But then, if we reject the idea of a future-myth in order to retain only that of a living and finite future, one which delimits transitory forms, we have not removed the antinomy of action; the present sacrifices and failures no longer seem compensated for in any point of time. And utility can no longer be defined absolutely. Thus, are we not ending by condemning action as criminal and absurd though at the same time condemning man to action?

## Ambiguity

The notion of ambiguity must not be confused with that of absurdity. To declare that existence is absurd is to deny that it can ever be given a meaning; to say that it is ambiguous is to assert that its meaning is never fixed, that it must be constantly won. Absurdity challenges every ethics; but also the finished rationalization of the real would leave no room for ethics; it is because man's condition is ambiguous that he seeks, through failure and outrageousness, to save his existence. Thus, to say that action has to be lived in its truth, that is, in the consciousness of the antinomies which it involves, does not mean that one has to renounce it. In *Plutarch Lied* Pierrefeu rightly says that in war there is no victory which can not be regarded as unsuccessful, for the objective which one aims at is the total annihilation of the enemy and this result is never attained; yet there are wars which are won and wars which are lost. So is it with any activity; failure and success are two aspects of reality which at the start are not perceptible. That is what makes criticism so easy and art so difficult: the critic is always in a good position to show the limits that every artist gives himself in choosing himself; painting is not given completely either in Giotto or Titian or Cezanne; it is sought through the centuries and is never finished; a painting in which all pictorial problems are resolved is really inconceivable; painting itself

is this movement toward its own reality; it is not the vain displacement of a millstone turning in the void; it concretizes itself on each canvas as an absolute existence. Art and science do not establish themselves despite failure but through it; which does not prevent there being truths and errors, masterpieces and lemons, depending upon whether the discovery or the painting has or has not known how to win the adherence of human consciousnesses; this amounts to saying that failure, always ineluctable, is in certain cases spared and in others not.

It is interesting to pursue this comparison; not that we are likening action to a work of art or a scientific theory, but because in any case human transcendence must cope with the same problem: it has to found itself, though it is prohibited from ever fulfilling itself. Now, we know that neither science nor art ever leaves it up to the future to justify its present existence. In no age does art consider itself as something which is paving the way for Art: so-called archaic art prepares for classicism only in the eyes of archaeologists; the sculptor who fashioned the Korai of Athens rightfully thought that he was producing a finished work of art; in no age has science considered itself as partial and lacunary; without believing itself to be definitive, it has however, always wanted to be a total expression of the world, and it is in its totality that in each age it again raises the question of its own validity. There we have an example of how man must, in any event, assume his finiteness: not by treating his existence as transitory or relative but by reflecting the infinite within it, that is, by treating it as absolute. There is an art only because at every moment art has willed itself absolutely; likewise there is a liberation of man only if, in aiming at itself, freedom is achieved absolutely in the very fact of aiming at itself. This requires that each action be considered as a finished form whose different moments, instead of fleeing toward the future in order to find there their justification, reflect and confirm one another so well that there is no longer a sharp separation between present and future, between means and ends.

But if these moments constitute a unity, there must be no contradiction among them. Since the liberation aimed at is not a *thing* situated in an unfamiliar time, but a movement which realizes itself by tending to conquer, it can not attain itself if it denies itself at the start; action can not seek to fulfill itself by means which would destroy its very meaning. So much so that in certain situations there will be no other issue for man than rejection. In what is called political realism there is no room for rejection because the present is considered as transitory; there is rejection only if man lays claim in the present to his existence as an absolute value; then he must absolutely reject what would deny this value. Today, more or less consciously in the name of such an ethics, we condemn a magistrate who handed over a communist to save ten hostages and along with him all the Vichyites who were trying "to make the best of things:" it was not a matter of rationalizing the present such as it was imposed by the German occupation, but of rejecting it unconditionally. The resistance did not aspire to a positive effectiveness; it was a negation, a revolt, a martyrdom; and in this negative movement freedom was positively and absolutely confirmed.

In one sense the negative attitude is easy; the rejected object is given unequivocally and unequivocally defines the revolt that one opposes to it; thus, all French antifascists were united during the occupation by their common resistance to a single oppressor. The return to the positive encounters many more obstacles, as we have well seen in France where divisions and hatreds were revived at the same time as were the parties. In the moment of rejection, the antinomy of action is removed, and means and end meet; freedom immediately sets itself up as its own goal and fulfills itself by so doing. But the antinomy reappears as soon as freedom again gives itself ends which are far off in the future; then, through the resistances of the given, divergent means offer themselves and certain ones come to be seen as contrary to their ends. It has often been observed that revolt alone is pure. Every construction implies the outrage of dictatorship, of violence. This is the theme, among others, of Koestler's *Gladiators*. Those who, like this

symbolic *Spartacus*, do not want to retreat from the outrage and resign themselves to impotence, usually seek refuge in the values of seriousness. That is why, among individuals as well as collectivities, the negative moment is often the most genuine. Goethe, Barres, and Aragon, disdainful or rebellious in their romantic youth, shattered old conformisms and thereby proposed a real, though incomplete, liberation. But what happened later on? Goethe became a servant of the state, Barres of nationalism, and Aragon of Stalinist conformism. We know how the seriousness of the Catholic Church was substituted for the Christian spirit, which was a rejection of dead Law, a subjective rapport of the individual with God through faith and charity; the Reformation was a revolt of subjectivity, but Protestantism in turn changed into an objective moralism in which the seriousness of works replaced the restlessness of faith. As for revolutionary humanism, it accepts only rarely the tension of permanent liberation; it has created a Church where salvation is bought by membership in a party as it is bought elsewhere by baptism and indulgences. We have seen that this recourse to the serious is a lie; it entails the sacrifice of man to the Thing, of freedom to the Cause. In order for the return to the positive to be genuine it must involve negativity, it must not conceal the antinomies between means and end, present and future; they must be lived in a permanent tension; one must retreat from neither the outrage of violence nor deny it, or, which amounts to the same thing, assume it lightly. Kierkegaard has said that what distinguishes the pharisee from the genuinely moral man is that the former considers his anguish as a sure sign of his virtue; from the fact that he asks himself, "Am I Abraham?" he concludes, "I am Abraham;" but morality resides in the painfulness of an indefinite questioning. The problem which we are posing is not the same as that of Kierkegaard; the important thing to us is to know whether, in given conditions, Isaac must be killed or not. But we also think that what distinguishes the tyrant from the man of good will is that the first rests in the certainty of his aims, whereas the second keeps asking himself, "Am I really working for the liberation of men? Isn't this end contested by the sacrifices through which I aim at it?" In setting up its ends, freedom

must put them in parentheses, confront them at each moment with that absolute end which it itself constitutes, and contest, in its own name, the means it uses to win itself.

It will be said that these considerations remain quite abstract. What must be done, practically? Which action is good? Which is bad? To ask such a question is also to fall into a naive abstraction. We don't ask the physicist, "Which hypotheses are true?" Nor the artist, "By what procedures does one produce a work whose beauty is guaranteed?" Ethics does not furnish recipes any more than do science and art. One can merely propose methods. Thus, in science the fundamental problem is to make the idea adequate to its content and the law adequate to the facts; the logician finds that in the case where the pressure of the given fact bursts the concept which serves to comprehend it, one is obliged to invent another concept; but he can not define *a priori* the moment of invention, still less foresee it. Analogously, one may say that in the case where the content of the action falsifies its meaning, one must modify not the meaning, which is here willed absolutely, but the content itself; however, it is impossible to determine this relationship between meaning and content abstractly and universally: there must be a trial and decision in each case. But likewise just as the physicist finds it profitable to reflect on the conditions of scientific invention and the artist on those of artistic creation without expecting any ready-made solutions to come from these reflections, it is useful for the man of action to find out under what conditions his undertakings are valid. We are going to see that on this basis new perspectives are disclosed.

In the first place, it seems to us that the individual as such is one of the ends at which our action must aim. Here we are at one with the point of view of Christian charity, the Epicurean cult of friendship, and Kantian moralism which treats each man as an end. He interests us not merely as a member of a class, a nation, or a collectivity, but as an individual man. This distinguishes us from the systematic politician who cares only about collective destinies; and probably a tramp enjoying his bottle of wine, or a child playing with a balloon,

or a Neapolitan lazzarone loafing in the sun in no way helps in the liberation of man; that is why the abstract will of the revolutionary scorns the concrete benevolence which occupies itself in satisfying desires which have no morrow. **However, it must not be forgotten that there is a concrete bond between freedom and existence; to will man free is to will there to *be* being, it is to will the disclosure of being in the joy of existence; in order for the idea of liberation to have a concrete meaning, the joy of existence must be asserted in each one, at every instant; the movement toward freedom assumes its real, flesh and blood figure in the world by thickening into pleasure, into happiness.** If the satisfaction of an old man drinking a glass of wine counts for nothing, then production and wealth are only hollow myths; they have meaning only if they are capable of being retrieved in individual and living joy. The saving of time and the conquest of leisure have no meaning if we are not moved by the laugh of a child at play. **If we do not love life on our own account and through others, it is futile to seek to justify it in any way.**

However, politics is right in rejecting benevolence to the extent that the latter thoughtlessly sacrifices the future to the present. The ambiguity of freedom, which very often is occupied only in fleeing from itself, introduces a difficult equivocation into relationships with each individual taken one by one. Just what is meant by the expression “to love others”? What is meant by taking them as ends? In any event, it is evident that we are not going to decide to fulfill the will of every man. There are cases where a man positively wants evil, that is, the enslavement of other men, and he must then be fought. It also happens that, without harming anyone, he flees from his own freedom, seeking passionately and alone to attain the being which constantly eludes him. If he asks for our help, are we to give it to him? We blame a man who helps a drug addict intoxicate himself or a desperate man commit suicide, for we think that rash behavior of this sort is an attempt of the individual against his own freedom; he must be made aware of his error and put in the presence of the real demands of his freedom. Well and good. But what if he persists? Must we then use violence? There again the serious man busies

himself dodging the problem; the values of life, of health, and of moral conformism being set up, one does not hesitate to impose them on others. But we know that this pharisaism can cause the worst disasters: lacking drugs, the addict may kill himself. It is no more necessary to serve an abstract ethics obstinately than to yield without due consideration to impulses of pity or generosity; violence is justified only if it opens concrete possibilities to the freedom which I am trying to save; by practicing it I am willy-nilly assuming an engagement in relation to others and to myself; a man whom I snatch from the death which he had chosen has the right to come and ask me for means and reasons for living; the tyranny practiced against an invalid can be justified only by his getting better; whatever the purity of the intention which animates me, any dictatorship is a fault for which I have to get myself pardoned. Besides, I am in no position to make decisions of this sort indiscriminately; the example of the unknown person who throws himself in to the Seine and whom I hesitate whether or not to fish out is quite abstract; **in the absence of a concrete bond with this desperate person my choice will never be anything but a contingent facticity.** If I find myself in a position to do violence to a child, or to a melancholic, sick, or distraught person the reason is that I also find myself charged with his upbringing, his happiness, and his health: I am a parent, a teacher, a nurse, a doctor, or a friend... So, by a tacit agreement, by the very fact that I am solicited, the strictness of my decision is accepted or even desired; the more seriously I accept my responsibilities, the more justified it is. **That is why love authorizes severities which are not granted to indifference.** What makes the problem so complex is that, on the one hand, one must not make himself an accomplice of that flight from freedom that is found in heedlessness, caprice, mania, and passion, and that, on the other hand, it is the abortive movement of man toward being which is his very existence, it is through the failure which he has assumed that he asserts himself as a freedom. To want to prohibit a man from error is to forbid him to fulfill his own existence, it is to deprive him of life. At the beginning of Claudel's *The Satin Shoe*, the husband of Dona Prouheze, the judge, the just, as the author regards him, explains that every plant needs a gardener in

order to grow and that he is the one whom heaven has destined for his young wife; beside the fact that we are shocked by the arrogance of such a thought (for how does he know that he is this enlightened gardener? Isn't he merely a jealous husband?) this likening of a soul to a plant is not acceptable; for, as Kant would say, **the value of an act lies not in its conformity to an external model, but in its internal truth.** We object to the inquisitors who want to create faith and virtue from without; we object to all forms of fascism which seek to fashion the happiness of man from without; and also the paternalism which thinks that it has done something for man by prohibiting him from certain possibilities of temptation, whereas what is necessary is to give him reasons for resisting it.

Thus, violence is not immediately justified when it opposes willful acts which one considers perverted; it becomes inadmissible if it uses the pretext of ignorance to deny a freedom which, as we have seen, can be practiced within ignorance itself. Let the "enlightened elites" strive to change the situation of the child, the illiterate, the primitive crushed beneath his superstitions; that is one of their most urgent tasks; but in this very effort they must respect a freedom which, like theirs, is absolute. They are always opposed, for example, to the extension of universal suffrage by adducing the incompetence of the masses, of women, of the natives in the colonies; **but this forgetting that man always has to decide by himself in the darkness, that he must want beyond what he knows.** If infinite knowledge were necessary (even supposing that it were conceivable), then the colonial administrator himself would not have the right to freedom; he is much further from perfect knowledge than the most backward savage is from him. Actually, to vote is not to govern; and to govern is not merely to maneuver; there is an ambiguity today, and particularly in France, because **we think that we are not the master of our destiny; we no longer hope to help make history, we are resigned to submitting to it;** all that our internal politics does is reflect the play of external forces, no party hopes to determine the fate of the country but merely to foresee the future which is being prepared in the world by foreign powers and to use, as best we can,

the bit of indetermination which still escapes their foresight. Drawn along by this tactical realism, the citizens themselves no longer consider the vote as the assertion of their will but as a maneuver, whether one adheres completely to the maneuvering of a party or whether one invents his own strategy; the electors consider themselves not as men who are consulted about a particular point but as forces which are numbered and which are ordered about with a view to distant ends. And that is probably why the French, who formerly were so eager to declare their opinions, take no further interest in an act which has become a disheartening strategy. So, the fact is that if it is necessary not to vote but to measure the weight of one's vote, this calculation requires such extensive information and such a sureness of foresight that only a specialized technician can have the boldness to express an opinion. But that is one of the abuses whereby the whole meaning of democracy is lost; the logical conclusion of this would be to suppress the vote. The vote should really be the expression of a concrete will, the choice of a representative capable of defending, within the general framework of the country and the world, the particular interests of his electors. The ignorant and the outcast also has interests to defend; he alone is "competent" to decide upon his hopes and his trust. By a sophism which leans upon the dishonesty of the serious, one does not merely argue about his formal impotence to choose, but one draws arguments from the content of his choice. I recall, among others, the naivete of a right-thinking young girl who said, "The vote for women is all well and good in principle, only, if women get the vote, they'll all vote red." With like impudence it is almost unanimously stated today in France that if the natives of the French Union were given the rights of self-determination, they would live quietly in their villages without doing anything, which would be harmful to the higher interests of the Economy. And doubtless the state of stagnation in which they choose to live is not that which a man can wish for another man; it is desirable to open new possibilities to the indolent negroes so that the interests of the Economy may one day merge with theirs. **But for the time being, they are left to vegetate in the sort of situation where their freedom can merely be negative – the best thing they can**

desire is not to tire themselves, not to suffer, and not to work; and even this freedom is denied them. It is the most consummate and unacceptable form of oppression.

However, the “enlightened elite” objects, one does not let a child dispose of himself, one does not permit him to vote. This is another sophism. To the extent that woman or the happy or resigned slave lives in the infantile world of ready-made values, calling them “an eternal child” or a “grown-up child” has some meaning, but the analogy is only partial. Childhood is a particular sort of situation: it is a natural situation whose limits are not created by other men and which is thereby not comparable to a situation of oppression; it is a situation which is common to all men and which is temporary for all; therefore, it does not represent a limit which cuts off the individual from his possibilities, but, on the contrary, the moment of a development in which new possibilities are won. The child is ignorant because he has not yet had the time to acquire knowledge, not because this time has been refused him. To treat him as a child is not to bar him from the future but to open it to him; he needs to be taken in hand, he invites authority, it is the form which the resistance of facticity, through which all liberation is brought about, takes for him. And on the other hand, even in this situation the child has a right to his freedom and must be respected as a human person. What gives *Emile* its value is the brilliance with which Rousseau asserts this principle. There is a very annoying naturalistic optimism in *Emile*; in the rearing of the child, as in any relationship with others, the ambiguity of freedom implies the outrage of violence; **in a sense, all education is a failure. But** Rousseau is right in refusing to allow childhood to be oppressed. And in practice raising a child as one cultivates a plant which one does not consult about its needs is very different from considering it as a freedom to whom the future must be opened.

Thus, we can set up point number one: the good of an individual or a group of individuals requires that it be taken as an absolute end of our action; but we are not authorized to decide upon this end a

*priori*. The fact is that no behavior is ever authorized to begin with, and one of the concrete consequences of existentialist ethics is the rejection of all the previous justifications which might be drawn from the civilization, the age, and the culture; it is the rejection of every principle of authority. To put it positively, the precept will be to treat the other (to the extent that he is the only one concerned, which is the moment that we are considering at present) as a freedom so that his end may be freedom; in using this conducting wire one will have to incur the risk, in each case, of inventing an original solution. Out of disappointment in love a young girl takes an overdose of phenol-barbital; in the morning friends find her dying, they call a doctor, she is saved; later on she becomes a happy mother of a family; her friends were right in considering her suicide as a hasty and heedless act and in putting her into a position to reject it or return to it freely. But in asylums one sees melancholic patients who have tried to commit suicide twenty times, who devote their freedom to seeking the means of escaping their jailers and of putting an end to their intolerable anguish; the doctor who gives them a friendly pat on the shoulder is their tyrant and their torturer. A friend who is intoxicated by alcohol or drugs asks me for money so that he can go and buy the poison that is necessary to him; I urge him to get cured, I take him to a doctor, I try to help him live; insofar as there is a chance of my being successful, I am acting correctly in refusing him the sum he asks for. But if circumstances prohibit me from doing anything to change the situation in which he is struggling, all I can do is give in; a deprivation of a few hours will do nothing but exasperate his torments uselessly; and he may have recourse to extreme means to get what I do not give him. That is also the problem touched on by Ibsen in *The Wild Duck*. An individual lives in a situation of falsehood; the falsehood is violence, tyranny: shall I tell the truth in order to free the victim? It would first be necessary to create a situation of such a kind that the truth might be bearable and that, though losing his illusions, the deluded individual might again find about him reasons for hoping. What makes the problem more complex is that the freedom of one man almost always concerns that of other individuals. Here is a married couple who persist in living in a hovel; if one does not

succeed in giving them the desire to live in a more healthful dwelling, they must be allowed to follow their preferences; but the situation changes if they have children; the freedom of the parents would be the ruin of their sons, and as freedom and the future are on the side of the latter, these are the ones who must first be taken into account. The Other is multiple, and on the basis of this new questions arise.

One might first wonder for whom we are seeking freedom and happiness. When raised in this way, the problem is abstract; the answer will, therefore, be arbitrary, and the arbitrary always involves outrage. It is not entirely the fault of the district social-worker if she is apt to be odious; because, her money and time being limited, she hesitates before distributing it to this one or that one, she appears to others as a pure externality, a blind facticity. Contrary to the formal strictness of **Kantianism** for whom the more abstract the act is the more virtuous it is, generosity seems to us to be better grounded and therefore more valid the less distinction there is between the other and ourself and the more we fulfill ourself in taking the other as an end. That is what happens if I am engaged in relation to others. The **Stoics** impugned the ties of family, friendship, and nationality so that they recognized only the universal form of man. But man is man only through situations whose particularity is precisely a universal fact. **There are men who expect help from certain men and not from others, and these expectations define privileged lines of action. It is fitting that the negro fight for the negro, the Jew for the Jew, the proletarian for the proletarian, and the Spaniard in Spain. But the assertion of these particular solidarities must not contradict the will for universal solidarity and each finite undertaking must also be open on the totality of men.**

But it is then that we find in concrete form the conflicts which we have described abstractly; for the cause of freedom can triumph only through particular sacrifices. And certainly there are hierarchies among the goods desired by men: one will not hesitate to sacrifice the comfort, luxury, and leisure of certain men to assure the liberation of

certain others; but when it is a question of choosing among freedoms, how shall we decide?

Let us repeat, one can only indicate a method here. The first point is always to consider what genuine human interest fills the abstract form which one proposes as the action's end. **Politics always puts forward Ideas: Nation, Empire, Union, Economy, etc. But none of these forms has value in itself; it has it only insofar as it involves concrete individuals.** If a nation can assert itself proudly only to the detriment of its members, if a union can be created only to the detriment of those it is trying to unite, the nation or the union must be rejected. We repudiate all idealisms, mysticisms, etcetera which prefer a Form to man himself. But the matter becomes really agonizing when it is a question of a Cause which genuinely serves man. That is why the question of Stalinist politics, the problem of the relationship of the Party to the masses which it uses in order to serve them, is in the forefront of the preoccupations of all men of good will. However, there are very few who raise it without dishonesty, and we must first try to dispel a few fallacies.

The opponent of the U.S.S.R. is making use of a fallacy when, emphasizing the part of criminal violence assumed by Stalinist politics, he neglects to confront it with the ends pursued. Doubtless, the purges, the deportations, the abuses of the occupation, and the police dictatorship surpass in importance the violences practiced by any other country; the very fact that there are a hundred and sixty million inhabitants in Russia multiplies the numerical coefficient of the injustices committed. But these quantitative considerations are insufficient. One can no more judge the means without the end which gives it its meaning than he can detach the end from the means which defines it. Lynching a negro or suppressing a hundred members of the opposition are two analogous acts. **Lynching is an absolute evil; it represents the survival of an obsolete civilization, the perpetuation of a struggle of races which has to disappear; it is a fault without justification or excuse.** Suppressing a hundred opponents is surely an outrage, but it may have meaning and a reason; it is a matter of

maintaining a regime which brings to an immense mass of men a bettering of their lot. Perhaps this measure could have been avoided; perhaps it merely represents that necessary element of failure which is involved in any positive construction. It can be judged only by being replaced in the ensemble of the cause it serves.

But, on the other hand, the defender of the U.S.S.R. is making use of a fallacy when he unconditionally justifies the sacrifices and the crimes by the ends pursued; it would first be necessary to prove that, on the one hand, the end is unconditioned and that, on the other hand, the crimes committed in its name were strictly necessary. Against the death of Bukharin one counters with Stalingrad; but one would have to know to what effective extent the Moscow trials increased the chances of the Russian victory. One of the ruses of Stalinist orthodoxy is, playing on the idea of necessity, to put the whole of the revolution on one side of the scale; the other side will always seem very light. But the very idea of a total dialectic of history does not imply that any factor is ever determining; on the contrary, if one admits that the life of a man may change the course of events, it is that one adheres to the conception which grants a preponderant role to Cleopatra's nose and Cromwell's wart. One is here playing, with utter dishonesty, on two opposite conceptions of the idea of necessity: one synthetic, and the other analytic; one dialectic, the other deterministic. **The first makes History appear as an intelligible becoming within which the particularity of contingent accidents is reabsorbed; the dialectical sequence of the moments is possible only if there is within each moment an indetermination of the particular elements taken one by one.** If, on the contrary, one grants the strict determinism of each causal series, one ends in a contingent and disordered vision of the ensemble, the conjunction of the series being brought about by chance. Therefore, a Marxist must recognize that none of his particular decisions involves the revolution in its totality; it is merely a matter of hastening or retarding its coming, of saving himself the use of other and more costly means. **That does not mean that he must retreat from violence but that he must not regard it as justified *a priori* by its ends.** If he considers his enterprise in its

truth, that is, in its finiteness, he will understand that he has never anything but a finite stake to oppose to the sacrifices which he calls for, and that it is an uncertain stake. Of course, this uncertainty should not keep him from pursuing his goals; but it requires that one concern himself in each case with finding a balance between the goal and its means.

Thus, we challenge every condemnation as well as every *a priori* justification of the violence practiced with a view to a valid end. They must be legitimized concretely. A calm, mathematical calculation is here impossible. One must attempt to judge the chances of success that are involved in a certain sacrifice; but at the beginning this judgment will always be doubtful; besides, in the face of the immediate reality of the sacrifice, the notion of chance is difficult to think about. On the one hand, one can multiply a probability infinitely without ever reaching certainty; but yet, practically, it ends by merging with this asymptote: in our private life as in our collective life there is no other truth than a statistical one. On the other hand, the interests at stake do not allow themselves to be put into an equation; the suffering of one man, that of a million men, are incommensurable with the conquests realized by millions of others, present death is incommensurable with the life to come. It would be utopian to want to set up on the one hand the chances of success multiplied by the stake one is after, and on the other hand the weight of the immediate sacrifice. One finds himself back at the anguish of free decision. And that is why political choice is an ethical choice: it is a wager as well as a decision; one bets on the chances and risks of the measure under consideration; but whether chances and risks must be assumed or not in the given circumstances must be decided without help, and in so doing one sets up values. If in 1793 the Girondists rejected the violences of the Terror whereas a Saint-Just and a Robespierre assumed them, the reason is that they did not have the same conception of freedom. Nor was the same republic being aimed at between 1830 and 1840 by the republicans who limited themselves to a purely political opposition and those who adopted the technique of insurrection. In each case it is a matter of

defining an end and realizing it, knowing that the choice of the means employed affects both the definition and the fulfillment.

Ordinarily, situations are so complex that a long analysis is necessary before being able to pose the ethical moment of the choice. We shall confine ourselves here to the consideration of a few simple examples which will enable us to make our attitude somewhat more precise. In an underground revolutionary movement when one discovers the presence of a stool-pigeon, one does not hesitate to beat him up; he is a present and future danger who has to be gotten rid of; but if a man is merely suspected of treason, the case is more ambiguous. We blame those northern peasants who in the war of 1914-18 massacred an innocent family which was suspected of signaling to the enemy; the reason is that not only were the presumptions vague, but the danger was uncertain; at any rate, it was enough to put the suspects into prison; while waiting for a serious inquiry it was easy to keep them from doing any harm. However, if a questionable individual holds the fate of other men in his hands, if, in order to avoid the risk of killing one innocent man, one runs the risk of letting ten innocent men die, it is reasonable to sacrifice him. We can merely ask that such decisions be not taken hastily and lightly, and that, all things considered, the evil that one inflicts be lesser than that which is being forestalled.

There are cases still more disturbing because there the violence is not immediately efficacious; the violences of the Resistance did not aim at the material weakening of Germany; it happens that their purpose was to create such a state of violence that collaboration would be impossible; in one sense, the burning of a whole French village was too high a price to pay for the elimination of three enemy officers; but those fires and the massacring of hostages were themselves parts of the plan; they created an abyss between the occupiers and the occupied. Likewise, the insurrections in Paris and Lyons at the beginning of the nineteenth century, or the revolts in India, did not aim at shattering the yoke of the oppressor at one blow, but rather at creating and keeping alive the meaning of the revolt and

at making the mystifications of conciliation impossible. Attempts which are aware that one by one they are doomed to failure can be legitimized by the whole of the situation which they create. This is also the meaning of Steinbeck's novel *In Dubious Battle* where a communist leader does not hesitate to launch a costly strike of uncertain success but through which there will be born, along with the solidarity of the workers, the consciousness of exploitation and the will to reject it.

It seems to me interesting to contrast this example with the debate in John Dos Passos' *The Adventures of a Young Man*. Following a strike, some American miners are condemned to death. Their comrades try to have their trial reconsidered. Two methods are put forward: one can act officially, and one knows that they then have an excellent chance of winning their case; one can also work up a sensational trial with the Communist Party taking the affair in hand, stirring up a press campaign and circulating international petitions; but the court will be unwilling to yield to this intimidation. The party will thereby get a tremendous amount of publicity, but the miners will be condemned. What is a man of good will to decide in this case? Dos Passos' hero chooses to save the miners and we believe that he did right. Certainly, if it were necessary to choose between the whole revolution and the lives of two or three men, no revolutionary would hesitate; but it was merely a matter of helping along the party propaganda, or better, of increasing somewhat its chances of developing within the United States; the immediate interest of the C.P. in that country is only hypothetically tied up with that of the revolution; in fact, a cataclysm like the war has so upset the situation of the world that a great part of the gains and losses of the past have been absolutely swept away. If it is really men which the movement claims to be serving, in this case it must prefer saving the lives of three concrete individuals to a very uncertain and weak chance of serving a little more effectively by their sacrifice the mankind to come. If it considers these lives negligible, it is because it too ranges itself on the side of the formal politicians who prefer the Idea to its content; it is because it prefers itself, in its subjectivity, to the goals

to which it claims to be dedicated. Besides, whereas in the example chosen by Steinbeck the strike is immediately an appeal to the freedom of the workers and in its very failure is already a liberation, the sacrifice of the miners is a mystification and an oppression; they are duped by being made to believe that an effort is being made to save their lives, and the whole proletariat is duped with them. Thus, in both examples, we find ourselves before the same abstract case: men are going to die so that the party which claims to be serving them will realize a limited gain; but a concrete analysis leads us to opposite moral solutions.

It is apparent that the method we are proposing, analogous in this respect to scientific or aesthetic methods, consists, in each case, of confronting the values realized with the values aimed at, and the meaning of the act with its content. The fact is that the politician, contrary to the scientist and the artist, and although the element of failure which he assumes is much more outrageous, is rarely concerned with making use of it. May it be that there is an irresistible dialectic of power wherein morality has no place? Is the ethical concern, even in its realistic and concrete form, detrimental to the interests of action? The objection will surely be made that hesitation and misgivings only impede victory. Since, in any case, there is an element of failure in all success, since the ambiguity, at any rate, must be surmounted, why not refuse to take notice of it? In the first number of the *Cahiers d'Action* a reader declared that once and for all we should regard the militant communist as "the permanent hero of our time" and should reject the exhausting tension demanded by existentialism; installed in the permanence of heroism, he will blindly direct himself toward an uncontested goal; but one then resembles Colonel de la Roque who unwaveringly went right straight ahead of him without knowing where he was going. Malaparte relates that the young Nazis, in order to become insensitive to the suffering of others, practiced by plucking out the eyes of live cats; there is no more radical way of avoiding the pitfalls of ambiguity. But an action which wants to serve man ought to be careful not to forget him on the way; if it chooses to fulfill itself blindly, it will lose its meaning or will

take on an unforeseen meaning; for the goal is not fixed once and for all; it is defined all along the road which leads to it. Vigilance alone can keep alive the validity of the goals and the genuine assertion of freedom. Moreover, ambiguity can not fail to appear on the scene; it is felt by the victim, and his revolt or his complaints also make it exist for his tyrant; the latter will then be tempted to put everything into question, to renounce, thus denying both himself and his ends; or, if he persists, he will continue to blind himself only by multiplying crimes and by perverting his original design more and more. The fact is that the man of action becomes a dictator not in respect to his ends but because these ends are necessarily set up through his will. Hegel, in his *Phenomenology*, has emphasized this inextricable confusion between objectivity and subjectivity. A man gives himself to a Cause only by making it his Cause; as he fulfills himself within it, it is also through him that it is expressed, and the will to power is not distinguished in such a case from generosity; when an individual or a party chooses to triumph, whatever the cost may be, it is their own triumph which they take for an end. If the fusion of the Commissar and the Yogi were realized, there would be a self-criticism in the man of action which would expose to him the ambiguity of his will, thus arresting the imperious drive of his subjectivity and, by the same token, contesting the unconditioned value of the goal. But the fact is that the politician follows the line of least resistance; it is easy to fall asleep over the unhappiness of others and to count it for very little; it is easier to throw a hundred men, ninety-seven of whom are innocent, into prison, than to discover the three culprits who are hidden among them; it is easier to kill a man than to keep a close watch on him; all politics makes use of the police, which officially flaunts its radical contempt for the individual and which loves violence for its own sake. The thing that goes by the name of political necessity is in part the laziness and brutality of the police. That is why it is incumbent upon ethics not to follow the line of least resistance; an act which is not destined, but rather quite freely consented to; it must make itself effective so that what was at first facility may become difficult. For want of internal criticism, this is the role that an opposition must take upon itself. There are two types of

opposition. The first is a rejection of the very ends set up by a regime: it is the opposition of anti-fascism to fascism, of fascism to socialism. In the second type, the oppositionist accepts the objective goal but criticizes the subjective movement which aims at it; he may not even wish for a change of power, but he deems it necessary to bring into play a contestation which will make the subjective appear as such. Thereby he exacts a perpetual contestation of the means by the end and of the end by the means. He must be careful himself not to ruin, by the means which he employs, the end he is aiming at, and above all not to pass into the service of the oppositionists of the first type. But, delicate as it may be, his role is, nevertheless, necessary. Indeed, on the one hand, it would be absurd to oppose a liberating action with the pretext that it implies crime and tyranny; for without crime and tyranny there could be no liberation of man; one can not escape that dialectic which goes from freedom to freedom through dictatorship and oppression. But, on the other hand, he would be guilty of allowing the liberating movement to harden into a moment which is acceptable only if it passes into its opposite; tyranny and crime must be kept from triumphantly establishing themselves in the world; the conquest of freedom is their only justification, and the assertion of freedom against them must therefore be kept alive.