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Existentialism Is a Humanism

My purpose here is to defend existentialism against some charges that have been brought against it.

First, it has been blamed for encouraging people to remain in a state of quietism and despair. For if all solutions are barred, we have to regard any action in this world as futile, and so at last we arrive at a contemplative philosophy. And inasmuch as contemplation is a luxury, we are only espousing yet another kind of bourgeois philosophy. These are the main reproaches made by the Communists.

Others have condemned us for emphasizing what is despicable about humanity, for exposing all that is sordid, suspicious, or base, while ignoring beauty and the brighter side of human nature. For example, according to Miss Mercier, a Catholic critic, we have forgotten the innocence of a child's smile.

One group after another censures us for overlooking humanity's solidarity, and for considering man as an isolated

being. This, contend the Communists, is primarily because we base our doctrine on pure subjectivity—that is, on the Cartesian *I think*—on the very moment in which man fully comprehends his isolation, rendering us incapable of re-establishing solidarity with those who exist outside of the self, and who are inaccessible to us through the *cogito*.

Christians, on the other hand, reproach us for denying the reality and validity of human enterprise, for inasmuch as we choose to ignore God's commandments and all values thought to be eternal, all that remains is the strictly gratuitous; everyone can do whatever he pleases and is incapable, from his own small vantage point, of finding fault with the points of view or actions of others.

It is these various charges that I want to address today, which is why I have entitled this brief discourse "Existentialism Is a Humanism." Many will be surprised by what I have to say here about humanism. We shall attempt to discover in what sense we understand it. In any case, let us begin by saying that what we mean by "existentialism" is a doctrine that makes human life possible and also affirms that every truth and every action imply an environment and a human subjectivity. It is public knowledge that the fundamental reproach brought against us is that we stress the dark side of human life. Recently someone told me about a lady who, whenever she inadvertently utters some vulgar expression in a moment of anger, excuses herself by saying: "I think I'm becoming an existentialist." So it would appear that existentialism is associ-

ated with something ugly, which is why some people call us naturalists. If we are, it is strange that we should frighten or shock people far more than naturalism per se frightens or offends them. Those who easily stomach a Zola novel like *The Earth* are sickened when they open an existentialist novel. Those who find solace in the wisdom of the people—which is a sad, depressing thing—find us even sadder. Yet, what could be more disillusioning than such sayings as "Charity begins at home," or even "Appoint a rogue and he'll do you damage, knock him down and he'll do you homage." We all know countless such popular sayings, all of which always point to the same thing: one should not try to fight against the establishment; one should not be more royalist than the king, or meddle in matters that exceed one's station in life; any action not in keeping with tradition is mere romanticism; any effort not based on proven experience is doomed; since experience shows that men are invariably inclined to do evil, there must be strict rules to restrain them, otherwise anarchy ensues. However, since it is the very same people who are forever spouting these dreary old proverbs—the ones who say "It is so human!" whenever some repugnant act is pointed out to them, the ones who are always harping on realistic litanies—who also accuse existentialism of being too gloomy, it makes me wonder if what they are really annoyed about is not its pessimism, but rather its optimism. For when all is said and done, could it be that what frightens them about the doctrine that I shall try to present to you here is that it offers man the

possibility of individual choice? To verify this, we need to reconsider the whole issue on a strictly philosophical plane. What, then, is "existentialism"?

Most people who use this word would be at a loss to explain what it means. For now that it has become fashionable, people like to call this musician or that painter an "existentialist." A columnist in *Clarté* goes by the pen name "The Existentialist." Indeed, the word is being so loosely applied to so many things that it has come to mean nothing at all. It would appear that, for lack of an avant-garde doctrine analogous to surrealism, those who thrive on the latest scandal or fad have seized upon a philosophy that hardly suits their purpose. The truth is that of all doctrines, this is the least scandalous and the most austere: it is strictly intended for specialists and philosophers. Yet it can be easily defined. What complicates the matter is that there are two kinds of existentialists: on one hand, the Christians, among whom I would include Karl Jaspers and Gabriel Marcel, both professed Catholics; and, on the other, the atheistic existentialists, among whom we should place Heidegger, as well as the French existentialists and myself.¹ What they have in common is simply their belief that existence precedes essence; or, if you prefer, that subjectivity must be our point of departure. What exactly do we mean by that? If we consider a manufactured object, such as a book or a paper knife, we note that this object was produced by a craftsman who drew his inspiration from a concept: he referred both to the concept of what a

paper knife is, and to a known production technique that is a part of that concept and is, by and large, a formula. The paper knife is thus both an object produced in a certain way and one that, on the other hand, serves a definite purpose. We cannot suppose that a man would produce a paper knife without knowing what purpose it would serve. Let us say, therefore, that the essence of the paper knife—that is, the sum of formulae and properties that enable it to be produced and defined—precedes its existence. Thus the presence before my eyes of that paper knife or book is determined. Here, then, we are viewing the world from a technical standpoint, whereby we can say "production precedes essence."

When we think of God the Creator, we usually conceive of him as a superlative artisan. Whatever doctrine we may be considering, say Descartes's or Leibniz's, we always agree that the will more or less follows understanding, or at the very least accompanies it, so that when God creates he knows exactly what he is creating. Thus the concept of man, in the mind of God, is comparable to the concept of the paper knife in the mind of the manufacturer: God produces man following certain techniques and a conception, just as the craftsman, following a definition and a technique, produces a paper knife. Thus each individual man is the realization of a certain concept within the divine intelligence. Eighteenth-century atheistic philosophers suppressed the idea of God, but not, for all that, the idea that essence precedes existence. We encounter this idea nearly everywhere: in the works of

Diderot, Voltaire, and even Kant. Man possesses a human nature; this “human nature,” which is the concept of that which is human, is found in all men, which means that each man is a particular example of a universal concept—man. In Kant’s works, this universality extends so far as to encompass forest dwellers—man in a state of nature—and the bourgeois, meaning that they all possess the same basic qualities. Here again, the essence of man precedes his historically primitive existence in nature.

Atheistic existentialism, which I represent, is more consistent. It states that if God does not exist, there is at least one being in whom existence precedes essence—a being whose existence comes before its essence, a being who exists before he can be defined by any concept of it. That being is man, or, as Heidegger put it, the human reality. What do we mean here by “existence precedes essence”? We mean that man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterward defines himself. If man as existentialists conceive of him cannot be defined, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus, there is no human nature since there is no God to conceive of it. Man is not only that which he conceives himself to be, but that which he wills himself to be, and since he conceives of himself only after he exists, just as he wills himself to be after being thrown into existence, man is nothing other than what he makes of himself. This is the first principle of existentialism.

It is also what is referred to as “subjectivity,” the very word used as a reproach against us. But what do we mean by that, if not that man has more dignity than a stone or a table? What we mean to say is that man first exists; that is, that man primarily exists—that man is, before all else, something that projects itself into a future, and is conscious of doing so. Man is indeed a project that has a subjective existence, rather unlike that of a patch of moss, a spreading fungus, or a cauliflower. Prior to that projection of the self, nothing exists, not even in divine intelligence, and man shall attain existence only when he is what he projects himself to be—not what he would like to be. What we usually understand by “will” is a conscious decision that most of us take after we have made ourselves what we are. I may want to join a party, write a book, or get married—but all of that is only a manifestation of an earlier and more spontaneous choice than what is known as “will.” If, however, existence truly does precede essence, man is responsible for what he is. Thus, the first effect of existentialism is to make every man conscious of what he is, and to make him solely responsible for his own existence. And when we say that man is responsible for himself, we do not mean that he is responsible only for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men.

The word “subjectivism” has two possible interpretations, and our opponents play with both of them, at our expense. Subjectivism means, on the one hand, the freedom of the individual subject to choose what he will be, and, on the

other, man's inability to transcend human subjectivity. The fundamental meaning of existentialism resides in the latter. When we say that man chooses himself, not only do we mean that each of us must choose himself, but also that in choosing himself, he is choosing for all men. In fact, in creating the man each of us wills ourselves to be, there is not a single one of our actions that does not at the same time create an image of man as we think he ought to be. Choosing to be this or that is to affirm at the same time the value of what we choose, because we can never choose evil. We always choose the good, and nothing can be good for any of us unless it is good for all. If, moreover, existence precedes essence and we will to exist at the same time as we fashion our image, that image is valid for all and for our whole era. Our responsibility is thus much greater than we might have supposed, because it concerns all mankind. If I am a worker and I choose to join a Christian trade union rather than to become a Communist, and if, by that membership, I choose to signify that resignation is, after all, the most suitable solution for man, and that the kingdom of man is not on this earth, I am not committing myself alone—I am choosing to be resigned on behalf of all—consequently my action commits all mankind. Or, to use a more personal example, if I decide to marry and have children—granted such a marriage proceeds solely from my own circumstances, my passion, or my desire—I am nonetheless committing not only myself, but all of humanity, to the practice of monogamy. I am therefore responsible for

myself and for everyone else, and I am fashioning a certain image of man as I choose him to be. In choosing myself, I choose man.

This allows us to understand the meaning behind some rather lofty-sounding words such as “anguish,” “abandonment,” and “despair.” As you are about to see, it is all quite simple. First, what do we mean by anguish? Existentialists like to say that man is in anguish. This is what they mean: a man who commits himself, and who realizes that he is not only the individual that he chooses to be, but also a legislator choosing at the same time what humanity as a whole should be, cannot help but be aware of his own full and profound responsibility. True, many people do not appear especially anguished, but we maintain that they are merely hiding their anguish or trying not to face it. Certainly, many believe that their actions involve no one but themselves, and were we to ask them, “But what if everyone acted that way?” they would shrug their shoulders and reply, “But everyone does *not* act that way.” In truth, however, one should always ask oneself, “What would happen if everyone did what I am doing?” The only way to evade that disturbing thought is through some kind of bad faith. Someone who lies to himself and excuses himself by saying “Everyone does not act that way” is struggling with a bad conscience, for the act of lying implies attributing a universal value to lies.

Anguish can be seen even when concealed. This is the anguish Kierkegaard called the anguish of Abraham. You

know the story: an angel orders Abraham to sacrifice his son. This would be okay provided it is really an angel who appears to him and says, "Thou, Abraham, shalt sacrifice thy son." But any sane person may wonder first whether it is truly an angel, and second, whether I am really Abraham. What proof do I have? There was once a mad woman suffering from hallucinations who claimed that people were phoning her and giving her orders. The doctor asked her, "But who exactly speaks to you?" She replied, "He says it is God." How did she actually know for certain that it was God? If an angel appears to me, what proof do I have that it is an angel? Or if I hear voices, what proof is there that they come from heaven and not from hell, or from my own subconscious, or some pathological condition? What proof is there that they are intended for me? What proof is there that I am the proper person to impose my conception of man on humanity? I will never find any proof at all, nor any convincing sign of it. If a voice speaks to me, it is always I who must decide whether or not this is the voice of an angel; if I regard a certain course of action as good, it is I who will choose to say that it is good, rather than bad. There is nothing to show that I am Abraham, and yet I am constantly compelled to perform exemplary deeds. Everything happens to every man as if the entire human race were staring at him and measuring itself by what he does. So every man ought to be asking himself, "Am I really a man who is entitled to act in such a way that the en-

tire human race should be measuring itself by my actions?" And if he does not ask himself that, he masks his anguish.

The anguish we are concerned with is not the kind that could lead to quietism or inaction. It is anguish pure and simple, of the kind experienced by all who have borne responsibilities. For example, when a military leader takes it upon himself to launch an attack and sends a number of men to their deaths, he chooses to do so, and, ultimately, makes that choice alone. Some orders may come from his superiors, but their scope is so broad that he is obliged to interpret them, and it is on his interpretation that the lives of ten, fourteen, or twenty men depend. In making such a decision, he is bound to feel some anguish. All leaders have experienced that anguish, but it does not prevent them from acting. To the contrary, it is the very condition of their action, for they first contemplate several options, and, in choosing one of them, realize that its only value lies in the fact that it was chosen. It is this kind of anguish that existentialism describes, and as we shall see it can be made explicit through a sense of direct responsibility toward the other men who will be affected by it. It is not a screen that separates us from action, but a condition of action itself.

And when we speak of "abandonment"—one of Heidegger's favorite expressions—we merely mean to say that God does not exist, and that we must bear the full consequences of that assertion. Existentialists are strongly opposed to a cer-

tain type of secular morality that seeks to eliminate God as painlessly as possible. Around 1880, when some French professors attempted to formulate a secular morality, they expressed it more or less in these words: God is a useless and costly hypothesis, so we will do without it. However, if we are to have a morality, a civil society, and a law-abiding world, it is essential that certain values be taken seriously; they must have an *a priori* existence ascribed to them. It must be considered mandatory *a priori* for people to be honest, not to lie, not to beat their wives, to raise children, and so forth. We therefore will need to do a little more thinking on this subject in order to show that such values exist all the same, and that they are inscribed in an intelligible heaven, even though God does not exist. In other words—and I think this is the gist of everything that we in France call “radicalism”—nothing will have changed if God does not exist; we will encounter the same standards of honesty, progress, and humanism, and we will have turned God into an obsolete hypothesis that will die out quietly on its own.

Existentialists, on the other hand, find it extremely disturbing that God no longer exists, for along with his disappearance goes the possibility of finding values in an intelligible heaven. There could no longer be any *a priori* good, since there would be no infinite and perfect consciousness to conceive of it. Nowhere is it written that good exists, that we must be honest or must not lie, since we are on a plane shared only by men. Dostoyevsky once wrote: “If God does not

exist, everything is permissible.” This is the starting point of existentialism. Indeed, everything is permissible if God does not exist, and man is consequently abandoned, for he cannot find anything to rely on—neither within nor without. First, he finds there are no excuses. For if it is true that existence precedes essence, we can never explain our actions by reference to a given and immutable human nature. In other words, there is no determinism—man is free, man is freedom. If, however, God does not exist, we will encounter no values or orders that can legitimize our conduct. Thus, we have neither behind us, nor before us, in the luminous realm of values, any means of justification or excuse. We are left alone and without excuse. That is what I mean when I say that man is condemned to be free: condemned, because he did not create himself, yet nonetheless free, because once cast into the world, he is responsible for everything he does. Existentialists do not believe in the power of passion. They will never regard a great passion as a devastating torrent that inevitably compels man to commit certain acts and which, therefore, is an excuse. They think that man is responsible for his own passion. Neither do existentialists believe that man can find refuge in some given sign that will guide him on earth; they think that man interprets the sign as he pleases and that man is therefore without any support or help, condemned at all times to invent man. In an excellent article, Francis Ponge once wrote: “Man is the future of man.”² This is absolutely true. However, if we were to interpret this to

mean that such a future is inscribed in heaven, and that God knows what it is, that would be false, for then it would no longer even be a future. If, on the other hand, it means that whatever man may appear to be, there is a future waiting to be created — a virgin future — then the saying is true. But for now, we are abandoned.

To give you an example that will help you to better understand what we mean by abandonment, I will mention the case of one of my students, who sought me out under the following circumstances: his father had broken off with his mother and, moreover, was inclined to be a “collaborator.” His older brother had been killed in the German offensive of 1940, and this young man, with primitive but noble feelings, wanted to avenge him. His mother, living alone with him and deeply hurt by the partial betrayal of his father and the death of her oldest son, found her only comfort in him. At the time, the young man had the choice of going to England to join the Free French Forces — which would mean abandoning his mother — or remaining by her side to help her go on with her life. He realized that his mother lived only for him and that his absence — perhaps his death — would plunge her into utter despair. He also realized that, ultimately, any action he might take on her behalf would provide the concrete benefit of helping her to live, while any action he might take to leave and fight would be of uncertain outcome and could disappear pointlessly like water in sand. For instance, in trying to reach England, he might pass through Spain and be detained there

indefinitely in a camp; or after arriving in England or Algiers, he might be assigned to an office to do paperwork. He was therefore confronted by two totally different modes of action: one concrete and immediate, but directed toward only one individual; the other involving an infinitely vaster group — a national corps — yet more ambiguous for that very reason and which could be interrupted before being carried out. And, at the same time, he was vacillating between two kinds of morality: a morality motivated by sympathy and individual devotion, and another morality with a broader scope, but less likely to be fruitful. He had to choose between the two.

What could help him make that choice? The Christian doctrine? No. The Christian doctrine tells us we must be charitable, love our neighbor, sacrifice ourselves for others, choose the “narrow way,” et cetera. But what is the narrow way? Whom should we love like a brother — the soldier or the mother? Which is the more useful aim — the vague one of fighting as part of a group, or the more concrete one of helping one particular person keep on living? Who can decide that *a priori*? No one. No code of ethics on record answers that question. Kantian morality instructs us to never treat another as a means, but always as an end. Very well; therefore, if I stay with my mother, I will treat her as an end, not as a means. But by the same token, I will be treating those who are fighting on my behalf as a means. Conversely, if I join those who are fighting, I will treat them as an end, and, in so doing, risk treating my mother as a means.

If values are vague and if they are always too broad in scope to apply to the specific and concrete case under consideration, we have no choice but to rely on our instincts. That is what this young man tried to do, and when I last saw him, he was saying: "All things considered, it is feelings that matter; I should choose what truly compels me to follow a certain path. If I feel that I love my mother enough to sacrifice everything else for her — my desire for vengeance, my desire for action, my desire for adventure — then I should stay by her side. If, to the contrary, I feel that my love for my mother is not strong enough, I should go." But how can we measure the strength of a feeling? What gave any value to the young man's feelings for his mother? Precisely the fact that he chose to stay with her. I may say that I love a friend well enough to sacrifice a certain sum of money for his sake, but I can claim that only if I have done so. I can say that I love my mother enough to stay by her side only if I actually stayed with her. The only way I can measure the strength of this affection is precisely by performing an action that confirms and defines it. However, since I am depending on this affection to justify my action, I find myself caught in a vicious circle.

Moreover, as Gide once pointed out, it is almost impossible to distinguish between playacting and true feelings. To decide that I love my mother and will stay with her, or to stay with her by putting on a charade, amount to the same thing. In other words, feelings are developed through the actions we take; therefore I cannot use them as guidelines for action.

This means that I shouldn't seek within myself some authentic state that will compel me to act, any more than I can expect any morality to provide the concepts that will enable me to act. You may say, "Well, he went to see a professor for advice." But if you consult a priest, for instance, it's you who has chosen to consult him, and you already know in your heart, more or less, what advice he is likely to give. In other words, to choose one's adviser is only another way to commit oneself. This is demonstrated by the fact that, if you are Christian, you will say "consult a priest." But there are collaborating priests, temporizing priests, and priests connected to the Resistance: which do you choose? Had this young man chosen to consult a priest connected to the Resistance, or a collaborating priest, he would have decided beforehand what kind of advice he was to receive. Therefore, in seeking me out, he knew what my answer would be, and there was only one answer I could give him: "You are free, so choose; in other words, invent. No general code of ethics can tell you what you ought to do; there are no signs in this world."

Catholics will reply: "But there *are* signs!" Be that as it may, it is I who chooses what those signs mean. When I was in a German prison camp, I met a rather remarkable man, who happened to be a Jesuit. This is how he came to join the order: he had experienced several frustrating setbacks in his life. His father died while he was still a child, leaving him in poverty, but he was awarded a scholarship to a religious institution where he was constantly reminded that he had been

accepted only out of charity. He was subsequently denied a number of distinctions and honors that would have pleased any child. Then, when he was about eighteen years old, he had an unfortunate love affair that broke his heart. Finally, at the age of twenty-two, what should have been a trifle was actually the last straw: he flunked out of military training school. This young man had every right to believe he was a total failure. It was a sign—but a sign of what? He could have sought refuge in bitterness or despair. Instead—and it was very clever of him—he chose to take it as a sign that he was not destined for secular success, and that his achievements would be attained only in the realms of religion, sanctity, and faith. He saw in all of this a message from God, and so he joined the order. Who can doubt that the meaning of the sign was determined by him, and by him alone? We might have concluded something quite different from this set of reversals—for example, that he might have been better off training to be a carpenter or a revolutionary. He therefore bears the full responsibility for his interpretation of the sign. This is what “abandonment” implies: it is we, ourselves, who decide who we are to be. Such abandonment entails anguish.

As for “despair,” it has a very simple meaning. It means that we must limit ourselves to reckoning only with those things that depend on our will, or on the set of probabilities that enable action. Whenever we desire something, there are always elements of probability. If I am counting on a visit from a friend who is traveling by train or trolley, then I

assume that the train will arrive on time, or that the trolley will not derail. I operate within a realm of possibilities. But we credit such possibilities only to the strict extent that our action encompasses them. From the moment that the possibilities I am considering cease to be rigorously engaged by my action, I must no longer take interest in them, for no God or greater design can bend the world and its possibilities to my will. In the final analysis, when Descartes said “Conquer yourself rather than the world,” he actually meant the same thing: we should act without hope. Marxists, with whom I have discussed this, reply: “Obviously, your action will be limited by your death; but you can rely on the help of others. You can count both on what others are doing elsewhere, in China, in Russia, to help you, and on what they will do later, that is, after your death, to carry on your work and bring it to fruition, which will be the revolution. What is more, you must rely on it; not to do so would be immoral.”

My initial response to this is that I will always depend on my comrades-in-arms in the struggle, inasmuch as they are committed, as I am, to a definite common cause, in the solidarity of a party or a group that I can more or less control—that is to say, that I joined the group as a militant and so its every move is familiar to me. In that context, counting on the solidarity and will of this party is exactly like counting on the fact that the train will arrive on time, or that the trolley will not derail. But I cannot count on men whom I do not know based on faith in the goodness of humanity or in man’s inter-

est in society's welfare, given that man is free and there is no human nature in which I can place my trust. I do not know where the Russian Revolution might lead. I can admire it and hold it up as an example to the extent that it is clear, to date, that the proletariat plays a part in Russia that it has attained in no other nation. But I cannot assert that this Revolution will necessarily lead to the triumph of the proletariat; I must confine myself to what I can see. Nor can I be certain that comrades-in-arms will carry on my work after my death and bring it to completion, seeing that those men are free and will freely choose, tomorrow, what man is to become. Tomorrow, after my death, men may choose to impose fascism, while others may be cowardly or distraught enough to let them get away with it. Fascism will then become humanity's truth, and so much the worse for us. In reality, things will be what men have chosen them to be. Does that mean that I must resort to quietism? No. First, I must commit myself, and then act according to the old adage: "No hope is necessary to undertake anything." This does not mean that I cannot belong to a party, just that I should have no illusions and do whatever I can. For instance, if I were to ask myself: "Will collectivization ever be a reality?" I have no idea. All I know is that I will do everything in my power to make it happen. Beyond that, I cannot count on anything.

Quietism is the attitude of people who say: "Others can do what I cannot do." The doctrine that I am presenting to you is precisely the opposite of quietism, since it declares that

reality exists only in action. It ventures even further than that, since it adds: "Man is nothing other than his own project. He exists only to the extent that he realizes himself, therefore he is nothing more than the sum of his actions, nothing more than his life." In view of this, we can clearly understand why our doctrine horrifies many people. For they often have no other way of putting up with their misery than to think: "Circumstances have been against me, I deserve a much better life than the one I have. Admittedly, I have never experienced a great love or extraordinary friendship, but that is because I never met a man or woman worthy of it; if I have written no great books, it is because I never had the leisure to do so; if I have had no children to whom I could devote myself, it is because I did not find a man with whom I could share my life. So I have within me a host of untried but perfectly viable abilities, inclinations, and possibilities that endow me with worthiness not evident from any examination of my past actions." In reality, however, for existentialists there is no love other than the deeds of love; no potential for love other than that which is manifested in loving. There is no genius other than that which is expressed in works of art; the genius of Proust resides in the totality of his works; the genius of Racine is found in the series of his tragedies, outside of which there is nothing. Why should we attribute to Racine the ability to write yet another tragedy when that is precisely what he did not do? In life, a man commits himself and draws his own portrait, outside of which there is nothing.

No doubt this thought may seem harsh to someone who has not made a success of his life. But on the other hand, it helps people to understand that reality alone counts, and that dreams, expectations, and hopes only serve to define a man as a broken dream, aborted hopes, and futile expectations; in other words, they define him negatively, not positively. Nonetheless, saying "You are nothing but your life" does not imply that the artist will be judged solely by his works of art, for a thousand other things also help to define him. What we mean to say is that a man is nothing but a series of enterprises, and that he is the sum, organization, and aggregate of the relations that constitute such enterprises.

In light of all this, what people reproach us for is not essentially our pessimism, but the sternness of our optimism. If people criticize our works of fiction, in which we describe characters who are spineless, weak, cowardly, and sometimes even frankly evil, it is not just because these characters are spineless, weak, cowardly, or evil. For if, like Zola, we were to blame their behavior on their heredity, or environmental influences, their society, or factors of an organic or psychological nature, people would be reassured and would say, "That is the way we are. No one can do anything about it." But when an existentialist describes a coward, he says that the coward is responsible for his own cowardice. He is not the way he is because he has a cowardly heart, lung, or brain. He is not like that as the result of his physiological makeup; he is like that because he has made himself a coward through his actions.

There is no such thing as a cowardly temperament; there are nervous temperaments, or "poor blood," as ordinary folks call it, or "rich temperaments," but just because a man has poor blood does not make him a coward, for what produces cowardice is the act of giving up, or giving in. A temperament is not an action; a coward is defined by the action he has taken. What people are obscurely feeling, and what horrifies them, is that the coward, as we present him, is guilty of his cowardice. People would prefer to be born a coward or be born a hero. One of the most frequent criticisms of *Roads to Freedom* may be expressed as follows: "Frankly, how can you make heroes out of people as spineless as this?" This objection is really quite comical, for it implies that people are born heroes. Essentially, that is what people would like to think. If you are born a coward, you need not let it concern you, for you will be a coward your whole life, regardless of what you do, through no fault of your own. If you are born a hero, you need not let it concern you either, for you will be a hero your whole life, and eat and drink like one. What the existentialist says is that the coward makes himself cowardly and the hero makes himself heroic; there is always the possibility that one day the coward may no longer be cowardly and the hero may cease to be a hero. What matters is the total commitment, but there is no one particular situation or action that fully commits you, one way or the other.

We have now, I think, dispensed with a number of charges brought against existentialism. You have seen that it cannot

be considered a philosophy of quietism, since it defines man by his actions, nor can it be called a pessimistic description of man, for no doctrine is more optimistic, since it declares that man's destiny lies within himself. Nor is existentialism an attempt to discourage man from taking action, since it tells him that the only hope resides in his actions and that the only thing that allows him to live is action. Consequently we are dealing with a morality of action and commitment. Nevertheless, on the basis of a few wrongheaded notions, we are also charged with imprisoning man within his individual subjectivity. In this regard, too, we are exceedingly misunderstood. For strictly philosophical reasons, our point of departure is, indeed, the subjectivity of the individual — not because we are bourgeois, but because we seek to base our doctrine on truth, not on comforting theories full of hope but without any real foundation. As our point of departure there can be no other truth than this: *I think therefore I am*. This is the absolute truth of consciousness confronting itself. Any theory that considers man outside of this moment of self-awareness is, at the outset, a theory that suppresses the truth, for outside of this Cartesian *cogito*, all objects are merely probable, and a doctrine of probabilities not rooted in any truth crumbles into nothing. In order to define the probable, one must possess what is true. Therefore, in order for any truth to exist, there must first be an absolute truth. The latter is simple, easy to attain, and within everyone's reach: one need only seize it directly.

In the second place, this is the only theory that endows man with any dignity, and the only one that does not turn him into an object. The effect of any form of materialism is to treat all men — including oneself — as objects, which is to say as a set of predetermined reactions indistinguishable from the properties and phenomena that constitute, say, a table, a chair, or a stone. Our aim is exactly to establish the human kingdom as a set of values distinct from the material world. But the subjectivity that we thereby attain as a standard of truth is not strictly individual in nature, for we have demonstrated that it is not only oneself that one discovers in the *cogito*, but also the existence of others. Contrary to the philosophy of Descartes, or of Kant, when we say "I think," we each attain ourselves in the presence of the other, and we are just as certain of the other as we are of ourselves. Therefore, the man who becomes aware of himself directly in the *cogito* also perceives all others, and he does so as the condition of his own existence. He realizes that he cannot be anything (in the sense in which we say someone is spiritual, or cruel, or jealous) unless others acknowledge him as such. I cannot discover any truth whatsoever about myself except through the mediation of another. The other is essential to my existence, as well as to the knowledge I have of myself. Under these conditions, my intimate discovery of myself is at the same time a revelation of the other as a freedom that confronts my own and that cannot think or will without doing so

for or against me. We are thus immediately thrust into a world that we may call “intersubjectivity.” It is in this world that man decides what he is and what others are.

Furthermore, although it is impossible to find in every man a universal essence that could be said to comprise human nature, there is nonetheless a universal human *condition*. It is no accident that today’s thinkers are more likely to speak of the condition of man rather than of his nature. By “condition” they refer, more or less clearly, to all limitations that *a priori* define man’s fundamental situation in the universe. Historical situations vary: a man may be born a slave in a pagan society or a feudal lord or a member of the proletariat. What never varies is the necessity for him to be in the world, to work in it, to live out his life in it among others, and, eventually, to die in it. These limitations are neither subjective nor objective; rather they have an objective as well as a subjective dimension: objective, because they affect everyone and are evident everywhere; subjective because they are *experienced* and are meaningless if man does not experience them —that is to say, if man does not freely determine himself and his existence in relation to them. And, as diverse as man’s projects may be, at least none of them seem wholly foreign to me since each presents itself as an attempt to surpass such limitations, to postpone, deny, or to come to terms with them. Consequently, every project, however individual, has a universal value. Every project—even one belonging to a Chinese, an Indian, or an African—can be understood by a

European. To say it can be understood means that the European of 1945, though his situation is different, must deal with his own limitations in the same way, and so can reinvent within himself the project undertaken by the Chinese, Indian, or black African. There is universality in every project, inasmuch as any man is capable of understanding any human project. This should not be taken to mean that a certain project defines man forever, but that it can be reinvented again and again. Given sufficient information, one can always find a way to understand an idiot, a child, a person from a so-called primitive culture, or a foreigner.

In this sense, we can claim that human universality exists, but it is not a given; it is in perpetual construction. In choosing myself, I construct universality; I construct it by understanding every other man’s project, regardless of the era in which he lives. This absolute freedom of choice does not alter the relativity of each era. The fundamental aim of existentialism is to reveal the link between the absolute character of the free commitment, by which every man realizes himself in realizing a type of humanity—a commitment that is always understandable, by anyone in any era—and the relativity of the cultural ensemble that may result from such a choice. We must also note the relativity of Cartesianism and the absolute nature of the Cartesian commitment. In this sense, we can say, if you prefer, that every one of us creates the absolute by the act of breathing, eating, sleeping, or by behaving in any fashion at all. There is no difference between

free being — being as a project, being as existence choosing its essence — and absolute being. Nor is there any difference between being as an absolute temporarily localized — that is, localized in history — and universally intelligible being.

This does not entirely refute the charge of subjectivism; in fact, that criticism is still being made in several ways. The most common instance is when people tell us, "So you can do whatever you like." This is expressed in various ways. First, they tax us with anarchy; then they say, "You cannot judge others, for there is no reason to prefer one project to another." Finally, they say, "Since all of your choices are arbitrary, you receive into one hand what you grant with the other." These three objections should not be taken too seriously. The first objection, that you can choose whatever you like, is simply incorrect. In one sense, choice is possible; what is impossible is not to choose. I can always choose, but I must also realize that, if I decide not to choose, that still constitutes a choice. This may seem a purely technical difference, but it is very important since it limits whim and caprice. Although it is true that in confronting any real situation, for example that I am capable of having sexual intercourse with a member of the opposite sex and of having children, I am obliged to choose an attitude toward the situation, and in any case I bear the responsibility of a choice that, in committing myself, also commits humanity as a whole. Even if no *a priori* value can influence my choice, the latter has nothing to do with caprice; and, if anyone thinks this is just another exam-

ple of Gide's theory of the gratuitous act, he has failed to grasp the vast difference between our theory and Gide's. Gide does not know what a situation is; he acts merely by caprice. Our view, on the other hand, is that man finds himself in a complex social situation in which he himself is committed, and by his choices commits all mankind, and he cannot avoid choosing. He will choose to abstain from sex, or marry without having children, or marry and have children. Whatever he does, he cannot avoid bearing full responsibility for his situation. He must choose without reference to any preestablished values, but it would be unfair to tax him with capriciousness. Rather, let us say that moral choice is like constructing a work of art.

At this point, we need to digress a moment to make it clear that we are not espousing an aesthetic morality, for our adversaries have shown such bad faith that they even reproach us for that. I invoke the example of artistic endeavor solely as a means of comparison. Having said that, has anyone ever blamed an artist for not following rules of painting established *a priori*? Has anyone ever told an artist what sort of picture he should paint? It is obvious that there is no pre-defined picture to be made, and that the artist commits himself in painting his own picture, and that the picture that ought to be painted is precisely the one that he will have painted. As we all know, there are no aesthetic values *a priori*, but there are values that will subsequently be reflected in the coherence of the painting, in the relationship between the

will to create and the finished work. No one can say what tomorrow's painting will look like; we cannot judge a painting until it is finished. What does that have to do with morality? We are in the same creative situation. We never speak of the gratuitousness of a work of art. When we discuss one of Picasso's paintings, we never say that it is gratuitous; we know full well that his composition became what it is while he was painting it, and that the body of his work is part and parcel of his life.

The same applies to the moral plane. What art and morality have in common is creation and invention. We cannot decide *a priori* what ought to be done. I believe I made that clear enough when discussing the case of the student who came to see me: regardless of whatever ethical system he might attempt to follow, whether Kantian or any other, none would offer any guidance. He was obliged to invent his own laws. Certainly we cannot claim that this young man — who chose to remain with his mother, taking as his guiding moral principles his feelings, individual action, and concrete charity (or who could have chosen sacrifice by going to England) — made a gratuitous choice. Man makes himself; he does not come into the world fully made, he makes himself by choosing his own morality, and his circumstances are such that he has no option other than to choose a morality. We can define man only in relation to his commitments. It is therefore ludicrous to blame us for the gratuitousness of our choices. In the second place, people tell us: "You cannot judge others."

In one sense this is true, in another not. It is true in the sense that whenever man chooses his commitment and his project in a totally sincere and lucid way, it is impossible for him to prefer another. It is also true in the sense that we do not believe in the idea of progress. Progress implies improvement, but man is always the same, confronting a situation that is forever changing, while choice always remains a choice in any situation. The moral dilemma has not changed from the days of the American Civil War, when many were forced to choose between taking sides for or against slavery, to our own time, when one is faced with the choice between the Popular Republican Movement [a Christian democratic party founded in 1944] and the Communists.

Nevertheless we can pass judgment, for as I said, we choose in the presence of others, and we choose ourselves in the presence of others. First, we may judge (and this may be a logical rather than a value judgment) that certain choices are based on error and others on truth. We may also judge a man when we assert that he is acting in bad faith. If we define man's situation as one of free choice, in which he has no recourse to excuses or outside aid, then any man who takes refuge behind his passions, any man who fabricates some deterministic theory, is operating in bad faith. One might object by saying: "But why shouldn't he choose bad faith?" My answer is that I do not pass moral judgment against him, but I call his bad faith an error. Here, we cannot avoid making a judgment of truth. Bad faith is obviously a lie because it

is a dissimulation of man's full freedom of commitment. On the same grounds, I would say that I am also acting in bad faith if I declare that I am bound to uphold certain values, because it is a contradiction to embrace these values while at the same time affirming that I am bound by them. If someone were to ask me: "What if I want to be in bad faith?" I would reply, "There is no reason why you should not be, but I declare that you are, and that a strictly consistent attitude alone demonstrates good faith." What is more, I am able to bring a moral judgment to bear. When I affirm that freedom, under any concrete circumstance, can have no other aim than itself, and once a man realizes, in his state of abandonment, that it is he who imposes values, he can will but one thing: freedom as the foundation of all values.

That does not mean that he wills it in the abstract; it simply means that the ultimate significance of the actions of men of good faith is the quest of freedom in itself. A man who joins a communist or revolutionary group wills certain concrete aims that imply an abstract will to freedom, yet that freedom must always be exercised in a concrete manner. We will freedom for freedom's sake through our individual circumstances. And in thus willing freedom, we discover that it depends entirely on the freedom of others, and that the freedom of others depends on our own. Of course, freedom as the definition of man does not depend on others, but as soon as there is commitment, I am obliged to will the freedom of

others at the same time as I will my own. I cannot set my own freedom as a goal without also setting the freedom of others as a goal. Consequently, when, operating on the level of complete authenticity, I have acknowledged that existence precedes essence, and that man is a free being who, under any circumstances, can only ever will his freedom, I have at the same time acknowledged that I must will the freedom of others. Therefore, in the name of this will to freedom, implied by freedom itself, I can pass judgment on those who seek to conceal from themselves the complete arbitrariness of their existence, and their total freedom. Those who conceal from themselves this total freedom, under the guise of solemnity, or by making determinist excuses, I will call cowards. Others, who try to prove their existence is necessary, when man's appearance on earth is merely contingent, I will call bastards. But whether cowards or bastards, they can be judged only on the grounds of strict authenticity. Thus, although the content of morality may vary, a certain form of that morality is universal. Kant states that freedom wills itself and the freedom of others. Agreed. But he believes that the formal and the universal are adequate to constitute a morality. We, to the contrary, believe that principles that are too abstract fail to define action. Consider again the case of the student: in the name of what — what inviolable moral maxim — could he possibly have decided, with perfect peace of mind, whether he should abandon or remain with his mother? There is no way

of judging. The content is always specific; inventiveness is always part of the process. The only thing that counts is whether or not invention is made in the name of freedom.

Consider, for example, the following two cases and you will see to what extent they are similar, despite their obvious differences. Take George Eliot's novel *The Mill on the Floss*. In that story, we encounter a young woman, Maggie Tulliver, who is the very incarnation of passion and is aware of the fact. She falls in love with a young man, Stephen, who is already engaged to a very ordinary young girl. Instead of recklessly pursuing her own happiness, Maggie chooses, in the name of human solidarity, self-sacrifice, giving up the man she loves. On the other hand, in Stendhal's *The Charterhouse of Parma*, La Sanseverina, who believes that passion is the measure of man, would say that a great love justifies any sacrifice, and must be preferred to the banality of a conjugal love like the one that would bind Stephen to his silly goose of a fiancée. It is the latter she would have chosen to sacrifice for her own happiness and, as Stendhal shows, she is even willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for passion's sake if life demands it. Here, we confront two diametrically opposed moralities, yet I maintain they are equivalent, inasmuch as the ultimate aim in both cases is freedom. Let us now imagine two different attitudes with strikingly similar effects: one girl, out of resignation, prefers to give up her lover, while the other, to fulfill her sexual desires, prefers to overlook the previous engagement of the man she loves. On the surface both cases seem to

mirror those we have just described. However, they are completely different. La Sanseverina's attitude has more in common with Maggie Tulliver's than it does with careless greed.

So, you can see that this second objection is both true and false. One can choose anything, so long as it involves free commitment.

The third objection, which we said can be stated as "You receive into one hand what you grant with the other," means, at bottom, our values need not be taken very seriously, since we choose them ourselves. In response, I can say that I very much regret it should be so, but if I have eliminated God the Father, there has to be someone to invent values. Things must be accepted as they are. What is more, to say that we invent values means neither more nor less than this: life has no meaning *a priori*. Life itself is nothing until it is lived, it is we who give it meaning, and value is nothing more than the meaning that we give it. You can see, then, that it is possible to create a human community. Some have blamed me for postulating that existentialism is a form of humanism.³ People have said to me, "But in *Nausea* you wrote that humanists are wrong; you even ridiculed a certain type of humanism, so why are you reversing your opinion now?" Actually, the word "humanism" has two very different meanings. By "humanism" we might mean a theory that takes man as an end and as the supreme value. For example, in his story *Around the World in 80 Hours*, Cocteau gives expression to this idea when one of his characters, flying over some mountains in a plane, pro-

claims: "Man is amazing!" This means: even though I myself may never have built a plane, I nevertheless still benefit from the plane's invention and, as a man, I should consider myself responsible for, and honored by, what certain other men have achieved. This presupposes that we can assign a value to man based on the most admirable deeds of certain men. But that kind of humanism is absurd, for only a dog or a horse would be in a position to form an overall judgment about man and declare that he is amazing, which animals scarcely seem likely to do — at least, as far as I know. Nor is it acceptable that a man should pronounce judgment on mankind. Existentialism dispenses with any judgment of this sort: existentialism will never consider man as an end, because man is constantly in the making. And we have no right to believe that humanity is something we could worship, in the manner of Auguste Comte. The cult of humanity leads ultimately to an insular Comteian humanism and — this needs to be said — to Fascism. We do *not* want that type of humanism.

But there is another meaning to the word "humanism." It is basically this: man is always outside of himself, and it is in projecting and losing himself beyond himself that man is realized; and, on the other hand, it is in pursuing transcendent goals that he is able to exist. Since man is this transcendence, he grasps objects only in relation to such transcendence. The only universe that exists is the human one — the universe of human subjectivity. This link between transcendence as constitutive

of man (not in the sense that God is transcendent, but in the sense that man passes beyond himself) and subjectivity (in the sense that man is not an island unto himself but always present in a human universe) is what we call "existentialist humanism." This is humanism because we remind man that there is no legislator other than himself and that he must, in his abandoned state, make his own choices, and also because we show that it is not by turning inward, but by constantly seeking a goal outside of himself in the form of liberation, or of some special achievement, that man will realize himself as truly human.

From these few comments, it is evident that nothing is more unjust than the objections people have brought against us. Existentialism is merely an attempt to draw all of the conclusions inferred by a consistently atheistic point of view. Its purpose is not at all to plunge mankind into despair. But if we label any attitude of unbelief "despair," as Christians do, then our notion of despair is vastly different from its original meaning.

Existentialism is not so much an atheism in the sense that it would exhaust itself attempting to demonstrate the nonexistence of God; rather, it affirms that even if God were to exist, it would make no difference — that is our point of view. It is not that we believe that God exists, but we think that the real problem is not one of his existence; what man needs is to rediscover himself and to comprehend that nothing can save him from himself, not even valid proof of the existence of

God. In this sense, existentialism is optimistic. It is a doctrine of action, and it is only in bad faith—in confusing their own despair with ours—that Christians are able to assert that we are “without hope.”

POST-LECTURE DISCUSSION

This discussion took place during the question-and-answer exchange following Sartre's lecture on existentialism. The first series of questions came from an unidentified member of the audience. Pierre Naville was a French surrealist author and leftist.

QUESTION: I don't know if this current effort to explain existentialism will make you better or less well understood, but I think that the clarification in *Action* makes your position somewhat harder to understand.⁴ “Despair” and “abandonment” have an even greater resonance in an existentialist text than they usually do. And it seems to me that your understanding of “despair” or “anguish” is something more fundamental than a simple choice made by a man who realizes that he is alone and so must make his own choices. It is an awareness of the human condition that does not occur all the time. That we must choose ourselves at all times is evident, but anguish and despair are hardly common emotions.

SARTRE: Obviously, I do not mean that when I choose between a cream pastry and a chocolate éclair, I am choosing in anguish. The anguish is constant in the sense that my

initial choice is a constant thing. Indeed, in my opinion, anguish is the total absence of justification accompanied, at the same time, by responsibility toward all.

QUESTION: I was speaking about the clarification offered in *Action*, and it seems to me that your viewpoint, as it was expressed there, was slightly weakened.

SARTRE: In all sincerity, it is possible that the article in *Action* did somewhat dilute my arguments. Many of the people who interview me are not qualified to do so. This leaves me with two alternatives: refuse to answer their questions, or agree to allow discussion to take place on a simplified level. I chose the second because, when all is said and done, whenever we present our theories in the classroom, we agree to dilute our thinking in order to make it understood, and that doesn't seem like such a bad thing. If we have a theory of commitment, we must be committed to the very end. If existentialist philosophy is, first and foremost, a philosophy that says “existence precedes essence,” it must be experienced if it is to be sincere. To live as an existentialist means to accept the consequences of this doctrine and not merely to impose it on others in books. If you truly want this philosophy to be a commitment, you have an obligation to make it comprehensible to those who are discussing it on a political or moral plane.

I am reproached for using the word “humanism.” That is because the problem poses itself as follows: either we must convey the doctrine on a strictly philosophical plane and