

The Ethics of Ambiguity

Simone de Beauvoir 1947

II. Personal Freedom and Others

Man's unhappiness, says Descartes, is due to his having first been a child. And indeed the unfortunate choices which most men make can only be explained by the fact that they have taken place on the basis of childhood. The child's situation is characterized by his finding himself cast into a universe which he has not helped to establish, which has been fashioned without him, and which appears to him as an absolute to which he can only submit. In his eyes, human inventions, words, customs, and values are given facts, as inevitable as the sky and the trees. This means that the world in which he lives is a serious world, since the characteristic of the spirit of seriousness is to consider values as ready-made things. That does not mean that the child himself is serious. On the contrary, he is allowed to play, to expend his existence freely. In his child's circle he feels that he can passionately pursue and joyfully attain goals which he has set up for himself. But if he fulfills this experience in all tranquillity, it is precisely because the domain open to his subjectivity seems insignificant and puerile in his own eyes. He feels himself happily irresponsible. The real world is that of adults where he is allowed only to respect and obey. The naive victim of the mirage of the for-others, he believes in the being of his parents and teachers. He takes them for the divinities which they vainly try to be and whose appearance they like to borrow before his ingenuous eyes. Rewards, punishments, prizes, words of praise or blame instill in him the conviction that there exist a good and an evil which like a sun and a moon exist as ends in themselves. In his universe of definite and substantial things, beneath the sovereign eyes of grown-up persons, he thinks that he too has *BEING* in a definite and substantial way. He is a good little boy or a scamp; he enjoys being it. If something deep inside him belies his conviction, he conceals this imperfection. He consoles himself for an inconsistency which he attributes to his young age by pinning his hopes on the future. Later on he too will become a big imposing statue. While waiting, he plays at being, at being a saint, a hero, a guttersnipe. He feels himself like those models whose images are sketched out in his books in broad, unequivocal strokes: explorer, brigand, sister of charity. This game of being serious can take on such an importance in the child's life that he himself actually becomes serious. We know such children who are caricatures of adults. Even when the joy of existing is strongest, when the child abandons himself to it, he feels himself protected against the risk of existence by the ceiling which human generations have built over his head. And it is by virtue of this that the child's condition (although it can be unhappy in other respects) is metaphysically privileged. Normally the child escapes the anguish of freedom.

He can, if he likes, be recalcitrant, lazy; his whims and his faults concern only him. They do not weigh upon the earth. They can not make a dent in the serene order of a world which existed before him, without him, where he is in a state of security by virtue of his very insignificance. He can do with impunity whatever he likes. He knows that nothing can ever happen through him; everything is already given; his acts engage nothing, not even himself.

There are beings whose life slips by in an infantile world because, having been kept in a state of servitude and ignorance, they have no means of breaking the ceiling which is stretched over their heads. Like the child, they can exercise their freedom, but only within this universe which has been set up before them, without them. This is the case, for example, of slaves who have not raised themselves to the consciousness of their slavery. The southern planters were not altogether in the wrong in considering the negroes who docilely submitted to their paternalism as "grown-up children." To the extent that they respected the world of the whites the situation of the black slaves was exactly an infantile situation. This is also the situation of women in many civilizations; they can only submit to the laws, the gods, the customs, and the truths created by the males. Even today in western countries, among women who have not had in their work an apprenticeship of freedom, there are still many who take shelter in the shadow of men; they adopt without discussion the opinions and values recognized by their husband or their lover, and that allows them to develop childish qualities which are forbidden to adults because they are based on a feeling of irresponsibility. If what is called women's futility often has so much charm and grace, if it sometimes has a genuinely moving character, it is because it manifests a pure and gratuitous taste for existence, like the games of children; it is the absence of the serious. The unfortunate thing is that in many cases this thoughtlessness, this gaiety, these charming inventions imply a deep complicity with the world of men which they seem so graciously to be contesting, and it is a mistake to be astonished, once the structure which shelters them seems to be in danger, to see sensitive, ingenuous, and lightminded women show themselves harder, more bitter, and even more furious or cruel than their masters. It is then that we discover the difference which distinguishes them from an actual child: the child's situation is imposed upon him, whereas the woman (I mean the western woman of today) chooses it or at least consents to it. Ignorance and error are facts as inescapable as prison walls. The negro slave of the eighteenth century, the Mohammedan woman enclosed in a harem have no instrument, be it in thought or by astonishment or anger, which permits them to attack the civilization which oppresses them. Their behavior is defined and can be judged only within this given situation, and it is possible that in this situation, limited like every human situation, they realize a perfect assertion of their freedom. But once there appears a possibility of liberation, it is resignation of freedom not to exploit the possibility, a resignation which implies dishonesty and which is a positive fault.

The fact is that it is very rare for the infantile world to maintain itself beyond adolescence. From childhood on, flaws begin to be revealed in it. With astonishment, revolt and disrespect the child little by little asks himself, "Why must I act that way? What good is it? And what will happen if I act in another way?" He discovers his subjectivity; he discovers that of others. And when he arrives at the age of adolescence he begins to vacillate because he notices the contradictions among adults as well as their hesitations and weakness. Men stop appearing as if they were gods, and at the same time the adolescent discovers the human character of the reality about him. Language, customs, ethics, and values have their source in these uncertain creatures. The moment has come when he too is going to be called upon to participate in their operation; his acts weigh upon the earth as much as those of other men. He will have to choose and decide. It is comprehensible that it is hard for him to live this moment of his history, and this is doubtless the deepest reason for the crisis of adolescence; the individual must at last assume his subjectivity.

From one point of view the collapsing of the serious world is a deliverance. Although he was irresponsible, the child also felt himself defenseless before obscure powers which directed the course of things. But whatever the joy of this liberation may be, it is not without great confusion that the adolescent finds himself cast into a world which is no longer ready-made, which has to be made; he is abandoned, unjustified, the prey of a freedom that is no longer chained up by anything. What will he do in the face of this new situation? This is the moment when he decides. If what might be called the natural history of an individual, his affective complexes, etcetera depend above all upon his childhood, it is adolescence which appears as the moment of moral choice. Freedom is then revealed and he must decide upon his attitude in the face of it. Doubtless, this decision can always be reconsidered, but the fact is that conversions are difficult because the world reflects back upon us a choice which is confirmed through this world which it has fashioned. Thus, a more and more rigorous circle is formed from which one is more and more unlikely to escape. Therefore, the misfortune which comes to man as a result of the fact that he was a child is that his freedom was first concealed from him and that all his life he will be nostalgic for the time when he did not know its exigencies.

This misfortune has still another aspect. Moral choice is free, and therefore unforeseeable. The child does not contain the man he will become. Yet, it is always on the basis of what he has been that a man decides upon what he wants to be. He draws the motivations of his moral attitude from within the character which he has given himself and from within the universe which is its correlative. Now, the child set up this character and this universe little by little, without foreseeing its development. He was ignorant of the disturbing aspect of this freedom which he was heedlessly exercising. He tranquilly abandoned himself to whims, laughter, tears, and anger which seemed to

him to have no morrow and no danger, and yet which left ineffaceable imprints about him. The drama of original choice is that it goes on moment by moment for an entire lifetime, that it occurs without reason, before any reason, that freedom is there as if it were present only in the form of contingency. This contingency recalls, in a way, the arbitrariness of the grace distributed by God in Calvinistic doctrine. Here too there is a sort of predestination issuing not from an external tyranny but from the operation of the subject itself. Only, we think that man has always a possible recourse to himself. There is no choice so unfortunate that he cannot be saved.

It is in this moment of justification – a moment which extends throughout his whole adult life – that the attitude of man is placed on a moral plane. The contingent spontaneity can not be judged in the name of freedom. Yet a child already arouses sympathy or antipathy. Every man casts himself into the world by making himself a lack of being; he thereby contributes to reinvesting it with human signification. He discloses it. And in this movement even the most outcast sometimes feel the joy of existing. They then manifest existence as a happiness and the world as a source of joy. But it is up to each one to make himself a lack of more or less various, profound, and rich aspects of being. What is called vitality, sensitivity, and intelligence are not ready-made qualities, but a way of casting oneself into the world and of disclosing being. Doubtless, every one casts himself into it on the basis of his physiological possibilities, but the body itself is not a brute fact. It expresses our relationship to the world, and that is why it is an object of sympathy or repulsion. And on the other hand, it determines no behavior. There is vitality only by means of free generosity. Intelligence supposes good will, and, inversely, a man is never stupid if he adapts his language and his behavior to his capacities, and sensitivity is nothing else but the presence which is attentive to the world and to itself. The reward for these spontaneous qualities issues from the fact that they make significances and goals appear in the world. They discover reasons for existing. They confirm us in the pride and joy of our destiny as man. To the extent that they subsist in an individual they still arouse sympathy, even if he has made himself hateful by the meaning which he has given to his life. I have heard it said that at the Nuremberg trial Goering exerted a certain seductive power on his judges because of the vitality which emanated from him.

If we were to try to establish a kind of hierarchy among men, we would put those who are denuded of this living warmth – the tepidity which the Gospel speaks of – on the lowest rung of the ladder. To exist is *to make oneself* a lack of being; it is to *cast* oneself into the world. Those who occupy themselves in restraining this original movement can be considered as sub-men. They have eyes and ears, but from their childhood on they make themselves blind and deaf, without love and without desire. This apathy manifests a fundamental fear in the face of existence, in the face of the risks and tensions which it implies. The sub-man rejects this “passion” which is his

human condition, the laceration and the failure of that drive toward being which always misses its goal, but which thereby is the very existence which he rejects.

Such a choice immediately confirms itself. Just as a bad painter, by a single movement, paints bad paintings and is satisfied with them, whereas in a work of value the artist immediately recognizes the demand of a higher sort of work, in like fashion the original poverty of his project exempts the sub-man from seeking to legitimize it. He discovers around him only an insignificant and dull world. How could this naked world arouse within him any desire to feel, to understand, to live? The less he exists, the less is there reason for him to exist, since these reasons are created only by existing.

Yet, he exists. By the fact of transcending himself he indicates certain goals, he circumscribes certain values. But he at once effaces these uncertain shadows. His whole behavior tends toward an elimination of their ends. By the incoherence of his plans, by his haphazard whims, or by his indifference, he reduces to nothingness the meaning of his surpassing. His acts are never positive choices, only flights. He can not prevent himself from being a presence in the world, but he maintains this presence on the plane of bare facticity. However, if a man were permitted to be a brute fact, he would merge with the trees and pebbles which are not aware that they exist; we would consider these opaque lives with indifference. But the sub-man arouses contempt, that is, one recognizes him to be responsible for himself at the moment that one accuses him of not willing himself. – The fact is that no man is a datum which is passively suffered; the rejection of existence is still another way of existing; nobody can know the peace of the tomb while he is alive. There we have the defeat of the sub-man. He would like to forget himself, to be ignorant of himself, but the nothingness which is at the heart of man is also the consciousness that he has of himself. His negativity is revealed positively as anguish, desire, appeal, laceration, but as for the genuine return to the positive, the sub-man eludes it. He is afraid of engaging himself in a project as he is afraid of being disengaged and thereby of being in a state of danger before the future, in the midst of its possibilities. He is thereby led to take refuge in the ready-made values of the serious world. He will proclaim certain opinions; he will take shelter behind a label; and to hide his indifference he will readily abandon himself to verbal outbursts or even physical violence. One day, a monarchist, the next day, an anarchist, he is more readily anti-semitic, anti-clerical, or anti-republican. Thus, though we have defined him as a denial and a flight, the sub-man is not a harmless creature. He realizes himself in the world as a blind uncontrolled force which anybody can get control of. In lynchings, in pogroms, in all the great bloody movements organized by the fanaticism of seriousness and passion, movements where there is no risk, those who do the actual dirty work are recruited from among the sub-men. That is why every man who wills himself free

within a human world fashioned by free men will be so disgusted by the sub-men. Ethics is the triumph of freedom over facticity, and the sub-man feels only the facticity of his existence. Instead of aggrandizing the reign of the human, he opposes his inert resistance to the projects of other men. No project has meaning in the world disclosed by such an existence. Man is defined as a wild flight. The world about him is bare and incoherent. Nothing ever happens; nothing merits desire or effort. The sub-man makes his way across a world deprived of meaning toward a death which merely confirms his long negation of himself. The only thing revealed in this experience is the absurd facticity of an existence which remains forever unjustified if it has not known how to justify itself. The sub-man experiences the desert of the world in his boredom. And the strange character of a universe with which he has created no bond also arouses fear in him. Weighted down by present events, he is bewildered before the darkness of the future which is haunted by frightful specters, war, sickness, revolution, fascism, bolshevism. The more indistinct these dangers are, the more fearful they become. The sub-man is not very clear about what he has to lose, since he has nothing, but this very uncertainty re-enforces his terror. Indeed, what he fears is that the shock of the unforeseen may remind him of the agonizing consciousness of himself.

Thus, fundamental as a man's fear in the face of existence may be, though he has chosen from his earliest years to deny his presence in the world, he can not keep himself from existing, he can not efface the agonizing evidence of his freedom. That is why, as we have just seen, in order to get rid of his freedom, he is led to engage it positively. The attitude of the sub-man passes logically over into that of the serious man; he forces himself to submerge his freedom in the content which the latter accepts from society. He loses himself in the object in order to annihilate his subjectivity. This certitude has been described so frequently that it will not be necessary to consider it at length. Hegel has spoken of it ironically. In *The Phenomenology of Mind* he has shown that the sub-man plays the part of the inessential in the face of the object which is considered as the essential. He suppresses himself to the advantage of the Thing, which, sanctified by respect, appears in the form of a Cause, science, philosophy, revolution, etc. But the truth is that this ruse miscarries, for the Cause can not save the individual insofar as he is a concrete and separate existence. After Hegel, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche also railed at the deceitful stupidity of the serious man and his universe. And *Being and Nothingness* is in large part a description of the serious man and his universe. The serious man gets rid of his freedom by claiming to subordinate it to values which would be unconditioned. He imagines that the accession to these values likewise permanently confers value upon himself. Shielded with "rights," he fulfills himself as a *being* who is escaping from the stress of existence. The serious is not defined by the nature of the ends pursued. A frivolous lady of fashion can have this mentality of the serious as well as an engineer. There is the

serious from the moment that freedom denies itself to the advantage of ends which one claims are absolute.

Since all of this is well known, I should like to make only a few remarks in this place. It is easily understood why, of all the attitudes which are not genuine, the latter is the most widespread; because every man was first a child. After having lived under the eyes of the gods, having been given the promise of divinity, one does not readily accept becoming simply a man with all his anxiety and doubt. What is to be done? What is to be believed? Often the young man, who has not, like the sub-man, first rejected existence, so that these questions are not even raised, is nevertheless frightened at having to answer them. After a more or less long crisis, either he turns back toward the world of his parents and teachers or he adheres to the values which are new but seem to him just as sure. Instead of assuming an affectivity which would throw him dangerously beyond himself, he represses it. Liquidation, in its classic form of transference and sublimation, is the passage from the affective to the serious in the propitious shadow of dishonesty. The thing that matters to the serious man is not so much the nature of the object which he prefers to himself, but rather the fact of being able to lose himself in it. So much so, that the movement toward the object is, in fact, through his arbitrary act the most radical assertion of subjectivity: to believe for belief's sake, to will for will's sake is, detaching transcendence from its end, to realize one's freedom in its empty and absurd form of freedom of indifference.

The serious man's dishonesty issues from his being obliged ceaselessly to renew the denial of this freedom. He chooses to live in an infantile world, but to the child the values are really given. The serious man must mask the movement by which he gives them to himself, like the mythomaniac who while reading a love-letter pretends to forget that she has sent it to herself. We have already pointed out that certain adults can live in the universe of the serious in all honesty, for example, those who are denied all instruments of escape, those who are enslaved or who are mystified. The less economic and social circumstances allow an individual to act upon the world, the more this world appears to him as given. This is the case of women who inherit a long tradition of submission and of those who are called "the humble." There is often laziness and timidity in their resignation; their honesty is not quite complete; but to the extent that it exists, their freedom remains available, it is not denied. They can, in their situation of ignorant and powerless individuals, know the truth of existence and raise themselves to a properly moral life. It even happens that they turn the freedom which they have thus won against the very object of their respect; thus, in *A Doll's House*, the childlike naivete of the heroine leads her to rebel against the lie of the serious. On the contrary, the man who has the necessary instruments to escape this lie and who does not want to use them consumes his freedom in denying, them. He makes himself serious.

He dissimulates his subjectivity under the shield of rights which emanate from the ethical universe recognized by him; he is no longer a man, but a father, a boss, a member of the Christian Church or the Communist Party.

If one denies the subjective tension of freedom one is evidently forbidding himself universally to will freedom in an indefinite movement. By virtue of the fact that he refuses to recognize that he is freely establishing the value of the end he sets up, the serious man makes himself the slave of that end. He forgets that every goal is at the same time a point of departure and that human freedom is the ultimate, the unique end to which man should destine himself. He accords an absolute meaning to the epithet *useful*, which, in truth, has no more meaning if taken by itself than the words *high*, *low*, *right*, and *left*. It simply designates a relationship and requires a complement: useful *for* this or that. The complement itself must be put into question, and, as we shall see later on, the whole problem of action is then raised.

But the serious man puts nothing into question. For the military man, the army is useful; for the colonial administrator, the highway; for the serious revolutionary, the revolution – army, highway, revolution, productions becoming inhuman idols to which one will not hesitate to sacrifice man himself. Therefore, the serious man is dangerous. It is natural that he makes himself a tyrant. Dishonestly ignoring the subjectivity of his choice, he pretends that the unconditioned value of the object is being asserted through him; and by the same token he also ignores the value of the subjectivity and the freedom of others, to such an extent that, sacrificing them to the thing, he persuades himself that what he sacrifices is nothing. The colonial administrator who has raised the highway to the stature of an idol will have no scruple about assuring its construction at the price of a great number of lives of the natives; for, what value has the life of a native who is incompetent, lazy, and clumsy when it comes to building highways? The serious leads to a fanaticism which is as formidable as the fanaticism of passion. It is the fanaticism of the Inquisition which does not hesitate to impose a credo, that is, an internal movement, by means of external constraints. It is the fanaticism of the Vigilantes of America who defend morality by means of lynchings. It is the political fanaticism which empties politics of all human content and imposes the State, not *for* individuals, but *against* them.

In order to justify the contradictory, absurd, and outrageous aspects of this kind of behavior, the serious man readily takes refuge in disputing the serious, but it is the serious of others which he disputes, not his own. Thus, the colonial administrator is not unaware of the trick of irony. He contests the importance of the happiness, the comfort, the very life of the native, but he reveres the Highway, the Economy, the French Empire; he reveres himself as a servant of these divinities.

Almost all serious men cultivate an expedient levity; we are familiar with the genuine gaiety of Catholics, the fascist "sense of humor." There are also some who do not even feel the need for such a weapon. They hide from themselves the incoherence of their choice by taking flight. As soon as the Idol is no longer concerned, the serious man slips into the attitude of the sub-man. He keeps himself from existing because he is not capable of existing without a guarantee. Proust observed with astonishment that a great doctor or a great professor often shows himself, outside of his specialty, to be lacking in sensitivity, intelligence, and humanity. The reason for this is that having abdicated his freedom, he has nothing else left but his techniques. In domains where his techniques are not applicable, he either adheres to the most ordinary of values or fulfills himself as a flight. The serious man stubbornly engulfs his transcendence in the object which bars the horizon and bolts the sky. The rest of the world is a faceless desert. Here again one sees how such a choice is immediately confirmed. If there is being only, for example, in the form of the Army, how could the military man wish for anything else than to multiply barracks and maneuvers? No appeal rises from the abandoned zones where nothing can be reaped because nothing has been sown. As soon as he leaves the staff, the old general becomes dull. That is why the serious man's life loses all meaning if he finds himself cut off from his ends. Ordinarily, he does not put all his eggs into one basket, but if it happens that a failure or old age ruins all his justifications, then, unless there is a conversion, which is always possible, he no longer has any relief except in flight; ruined, dishonored, this important personage is now only a "has-been." He joins the sub-man, unless by suicide he once and for all puts an end to the agony of his freedom.

It is in a state of fear that the serious man feels this dependence upon the object; and the first of virtues, in his eyes, is prudence. He escapes the anguish of freedom only to fall into a state of preoccupation, of worry. Everything is a threat to him, since the thing which he has set up as an idol is an externality and is thus in relationship with the whole universe and consequently threatened by the whole universe; and since, despite all precautions, he will never be the master of this exterior world to which he has consented to submit, he will be instantly upset by the uncontrollable course of events.

He will always be saying that he is disappointed, for his wish to have the world harden into a thing is belied by the very movement of life. The future will contest his present successes; his children will disobey him, his will will be opposed by those of strangers; he will be a prey to ill humor and bitterness. His very successes have a taste of ashes, for the serious is one of those ways of trying to realize the impossible synthesis of the in-itself and the for-itself. The serious man wills himself to be a god; but he is not one and knows it. He wishes to rid himself of his subjectivity, but it constantly risks being unmasked; it is unmasked. Transcending all goals, reflection wonders,

“What’s the use?” There then blazes forth the absurdity of a life which has sought outside of itself the justifications which it alone could give itself. Detached from the freedom which might have genuinely grounded them, all the ends that have been pursued appear arbitrary and useless.

This failure of the serious sometimes brings about a radical disorder. Conscious of being unable to be anything, man then decides to be nothing. We shall call this attitude nihilistic. The nihilist is close to the spirit of seriousness, for instead of realizing his negativity as a living movement, he conceives his annihilation in a substantial way. He wants to *be* nothing, and this nothing that he dreams of is still another sort of being, the exact Hegelian antithesis of being, a stationary datum. Nihilism is disappointed seriousness which has turned back upon itself. A choice of this kind is not encountered among those who, feeling the joy of existence, assume its gratuity. It appears either at the moment of adolescence, when the individual, seeing his child’s universe flow away, feels the lack which is in his heart, or, later on, when the attempts to fulfill himself as a being have failed; in any case, among men who wish to rid themselves of the anxiety of their freedom by denying the world and themselves. By this rejection, they draw near to the sub-man. The difference is that their withdrawal is not their original movement. At first, they cast themselves into the world, sometimes even with a largeness of spirit. They exist and they know it.

It sometimes happens that, in his state of deception, a man maintains a sort of affection for the serious world; this is how Sartre describes Baudelaire in his study of the poet. Baudelaire felt a burning rancor in regard to the values of his childhood, but this rancor still involved some respect. Scorn alone liberated him. It was necessary for him that the universe which he rejected continue in order for him to detest it and scoff at it; it is the attitude of the demoniacal man as Jouhandeau has also described him: one stubbornly maintains the values of childhood, of a society, or of a Church in order to be able to trample upon them. The demoniacal man is still very close to the serious; he wants to believe in it; he confirms it by his very revolt; he feels himself as a negation and a freedom, but he does not realize this freedom as a positive liberation.

One can go much further in rejection by occupying himself not in scorning but in annihilating the rejected world and himself along with it. For example, the man who gives himself to a cause which he knows to be lost chooses to merge the world with one of its aspects which carries within it the germ of its ruin, involving himself in this condemned universe and condemning himself with it. Another man devotes his time and energy to an undertaking which was not doomed to failure at the start but which he himself is bent on ruining. Still another rejects each of his projects one after the other, frittering them away in a series of caprices and thereby systematically annulling the ends which he is aiming at. The constant negation of the word by the word, of the act by the act, of

art by art was realized by Dadaist incoherence. By following a strict injunction to commit disorder and anarchy, one achieved the abolition of all behavior, and therefore of all ends and of oneself.

But this will to negation is forever belying itself, for it manifests itself as a presence at the very moment that it displays itself. It therefore implies a constant tension, inversely symmetrical with the existential and more painful tension, for if it is true that man is not, it is also true that he exists, and in order to realize his negativity positively he will have to contradict constantly the movement of existence. If one does not resign himself to suicide one slips easily into a more stable attitude than the shrill rejection of nihilism. Surrealism provides us with a historical and concrete example of different possible kinds of evolution. Certain initiates, such as Vache and Crevel, had recourse to the radical solution of suicide. Others destroyed their bodies and ruined their minds by drugs. Others succeeded in a sort of moral suicide; by dint of depopulating the world around them, they found themselves in a desert, with themselves reduced to the level of the sub-man; they no longer try to flee, they are fleeing. There are also some who have again sought out the security of the serious. They have reformed, arbitrarily choosing marriage, politics, or religion as refuges. Even the surrealists who have wanted to remain faithful to themselves have been unable to avoid returning to the positive, to the serious. The negation of aesthetic, spiritual, and moral values has become an ethics; unruliness has become a rule. We have been present at the establishment of a new Church, with its dogmas, its rites, its faithful, its priests, and even its martyrs; today, there is nothing of the destroyer in Breton; he is a pope. And as every assassination of painting is still a painting, a lot of surrealists have found themselves the authors of positive works; their revolt has become the matter on which their career has been built. Finally, some of them, in a genuine return to the positive, have been able to realize their freedom; they have given it a content without disavowing it. They have engaged themselves, without losing themselves, in political action, in intellectual or artistic research, in family or social life.

The attitude of the nihilist can perpetuate itself as such only if it reveals itself as a positivity at its very core. Rejecting his own existence, the nihilist must also reject the existences which confirm it. If he wills himself to be nothing, all mankind must also be annihilated; otherwise, by means of the presence of this world that the Other reveals he meets himself as a presence in the world. But this thirst for destruction immediately takes the form of a desire for power. The taste of nothingness joins the original taste of being whereby every man is first defined; he realizes himself as a being by making himself that by which nothingness comes into the world. Thus, Nazism was both a will for power and a will for suicide at the same time. From a historical point of view, Nazism has many other features besides; in particular, beside the dark romanticism which led Rauschning to entitle his work *The Revolution of Nihilism*, we also find a gloomy seriousness.

The fact is that Nazism was in the service of petit bourgeois seriousness. But it is interesting to note that its ideology did not make this alliance impossible, for the serious often rallies to a partial nihilism, denying everything which is not its object in order to hide from itself the antinomies of action.

A rather pure example of this impassioned nihilism is the well-known case of Drieu la Rochelle. *The Empty Suitcase* is the testimony of a young man who acutely felt the fact of existing as a lack of being, of not being. This is a genuine experience on the basis of which the only possible salvation is to assume the lack, to side with the man who exists against the idea of a God who does not. On the contrary – a novel like *Gilles* is proof – Drieu stubbornly persisted in his deception. In his hatred of himself he chose to reject his condition as a man, and this led him to hate all men along with himself. Gilles knows satisfaction only when he fires on Spanish workers and sees the flow of blood which he compares to the redeeming blood of Christ; as if the only salvation by man were the death of other men, whereby perfect negation is achieved. It is natural that this path ended in collaboration, the ruin of a detested world being merged for Drieu with the annulment of himself. An external failure led him to give to his life a conclusion which it called for dialectically: suicide.

The nihilist attitude manifests a certain truth. In this attitude one experiences the ambiguity of the human condition. But the mistake is that it defines man not as the positive existence of a lack, but as a lack at the heart of existence, whereas the truth is that existence is not a lack as such. And if freedom is experienced in this case in the form of rejection, it is not genuinely fulfilled. The nihilist is right in thinking that the world *possesses* no justification and that he himself is nothing. But he forgets that it is up to him to justify the world and to man himself exist validly. Instead of integrating death into life, he sees in it the only truth of the life which appears to him as a disguised death. However, there is life, and the nihilist knows that he is alive. That's where his failure lies. He rejects existence without managing to eliminate it. He denies any meaning to his transcendence, and yet he transcends himself. A man who delights in freedom can find an ally in the nihilist because they contest the serious world together, but he also sees in him an enemy insofar as the nihilist is a systematic rejection of the world and man, and if this rejection ends up in a positive desire, destruction, it then establishes a tyranny which freedom must stand up against.

The fundamental fault of the nihilist is that, challenging all given values, he does not find, beyond their ruin, the importance of that universal, absolute end which freedom itself is. It is possible that, even in this failure, a man may nevertheless keep his taste for an existence which he

originally felt as a joy. Hoping for no justification, he will nevertheless take delight in living. He will not turn aside from things which he does not believe in. He will seek a pretext in them for a gratuitous display of activity. Such a man is what is generally called an adventurer. He throws himself into his undertakings with zest, into exploration, conquest, war, speculation, love, politics, but he does not attach himself to the end at which he aims; only to his conquest. He likes action for its own sake. He finds joy in spreading through the world a freedom which remains indifferent to its content. Whether the taste for adventure appears to be based on nihilistic despair or whether it is born directly from the experience of the happy days of childhood, it always implies that freedom is realized as an independence in regard to the serious world and that, on the other hand, the ambiguity of existence is felt not as a lack but in its positive aspect. This attitude dialectically envelops nihilism's opposition to the serious and the opposition to nihilism by existence as such. But, of course, the concrete history of an individual does not necessarily espouse this dialectic, by virtue of the fact that his condition is wholly present to him at each moment and because his freedom before it is, at every moment, total. From the time of his adolescence a man can define himself as an adventurer. The union of an original, abundant vitality and a reflective scepticism will particularly lead to this choice.

It is obvious that this choice is very close to a genuinely moral attitude. The adventurer does not propose to be; he deliberately makes himself a lack of being; he aims expressly at existence; though engaged in his undertaking, he is at the same time detached from the goal. Whether he succeeds or fails, he goes right ahead throwing himself into a new enterprise to which he will give himself with the same indifferent ardor. It is not from things that he expects the justification of his choices. Considering such behavior at the moment of its subjectivity, we see that it conforms to the requirements of ethics, and if existentialism were solipsistic, as is generally claimed, it would have to regard the adventurer as its perfect hero.

First of all, it should be noticed that the adventurer's attitude is not always pure. Behind the appearance of caprice, there are many men who pursue a secret goal in utter seriousness; for example, fortune or glory. They proclaim their scepticism in regard to recognized values. They do not take politics seriously. They thereby allow themselves to be collaborationists in '41 and communists in '45, and it is true they don't give a hang about the interests of the French people or the proletariat; they are attached to their career, to their success. This *arrivisme* is at the very antipodes of the spirit of adventure, because the zest for existence is then never experienced in its gratuity. It also happens that the genuine love for adventure is inextricably mixed with an attachment to the values of the serious. Cortez and the conquistadors served God and the emperor by serving their own pleasure. Adventure can also be shot through with passion. The taste for

conquest is often subtly tied up with the taste for possession. Was seduction all that Don Juan liked? Did he not also like women? Or was he not even looking for a woman capable of satisfying him?

But even if we consider adventure in its purity, it appears to us to be satisfying only at a subjective moment, which, in fact, is a quite abstract moment. The adventurer always meets others along the way; the conquistador meets the Indians; the condottiere hacks out a path through blood and ruins; the explorer has comrades about him or soldiers under his orders; every Don Juan is confronted with Elviras. Every undertaking unfolds in a human world and affects men. What distinguishes adventure from a simple game is that the adventurer does not limit himself to asserting his existence in solitary fashion. He asserts it in relationship to other existences. He has to declare himself.

Two attitudes are possible. He can become conscious of the real requirements of his own freedom, which can will itself only by destining itself to an open future, by seeking to extend itself by means of the freedom of others. Therefore, in any case, the freedom of other men must be respected and they must be helped to free themselves. Such a law imposes limits upon action and at the same time immediately gives it a content. Beyond the rejected seriousness is found a genuine seriousness. But the man who acts in this way, whose end is the liberation of himself and others, who forces himself to respect this end through the means which he uses to attain it, no longer deserves the name of adventurer. One would not dream for example, of applying it to a Lawrence, who was so concerned about the lives of his companions and the freedom of others, so tormented by the human problems which all action raises. One is then in the presence of a genuinely free man.

The man we call an adventurer, on the contrary, is one who remains indifferent to the content, that is, to the human meaning of his action, who thinks he can assert his own existence without taking into account that of others. The fate of Italy mattered very little to the Italian condottiere; the massacres of the Indians meant nothing to Pizarro; Don Juan was unaffected by Elvira's tears. Indifferent to the ends they set up for themselves, they were still more indifferent to the means of attaining them; they cared only for their pleasure or their glory. This implies that the adventurer shares the nihilist's contempt for men. And it is by this very contempt that he believes he breaks away from the contemptible condition in which those who do not imitate his pride are stagnating. Thus, nothing prevents him from sacrificing these insignificant beings to his own will for power. He will treat them like instruments; he will destroy them if they get in his way. But meanwhile he appears as an enemy in the eyes of others. His undertaking is not only an individual wager; it is a

combat. He can not win the game without making himself a tyrant or a hangman. And as he can not impose this tyranny without help, he is obliged to serve the regime which will allow him to exercise it. He needs money, arms, soldiers, or the support of the police and the laws. It is not a matter of chance, but a dialectical necessity which leads the adventurer to be complacent regarding all regimes which defend the privilege of a class or a party, and more particularly authoritarian regimes and fascism. He needs fortune, leisure, and enjoyment, and he will take these goods as supreme ends in order to be prepared to remain free in regard to any end. Thus, confusing a quite external availability with real freedom, he falls, with a pretext of independence, into the servitude of the object. He will range himself on the side of the regimes which guarantee him his privileges, and he will prefer those which confirm him in his contempt regarding the common herd. He will make himself its accomplice, its servant, or even its valet, alienating a freedom which, in reality, can not confirm itself as such if it does not wear its own face. In order to have wanted to limit it to itself, in order to have emptied it of all concrete content, he realizes it only as an abstract independence which turns into servitude. He must submit to masters unless he makes himself the supreme master. Favorable circumstances are enough to transform the adventurer into a dictator. He carries the seed of one within him, since he regards mankind as indifferent matter destined to support the game of his existence. But what he then knows is the supreme servitude of tyranny.

Hegel's criticism of the tyrant is applicable to the adventurer to the extent that he is himself a tyrant, or at the very least an accomplice of the oppressor. No man can save himself alone. Doubtless, in the very heat of an action the adventurer can know a joy which is sufficient unto itself, but once the undertaking is over and has congealed behind him into a thing, it must, in order to remain alive, be animated anew by a human intention which must transcend it toward the future into recognition or admiration. When he dies, the adventurer will be surrendering his whole life into the hands of men; the only meaning it will have will be the one they confer upon it. He knows this since he talks about himself, often in books. For want of a work, many desire to bequeath their own personality to posterity: at least during their lifetime they need the approval of a few faithful. Forgotten and detested, the adventurer loses the taste for his own existence. Perhaps without his knowing it, it seems so precious to him because of others. It willed itself to be an affirmation, an example to all mankind. Once it falls back upon itself, it becomes futile and unjustified.

Thus, the adventurer devises a sort of moral behavior because he assumes his subjectivity positively. But if he dishonestly refuses to recognize that this subjectivity necessarily transcends itself toward others, he will enclose himself in a false independence which will indeed be

servitude. To the free man he will be only a chance ally in whom one can have no confidence; he will easily become an enemy. His fault is believing that one can do something for oneself without others and even against them.

The passionate man is, in a way, the antithesis of the adventurer. In him too there is a sketch of the synthesis of freedom and its content. But in the adventurer it is the content which does not succeed in being genuinely fulfilled. Whereas in the passionate man it is subjectivity which fails to fulfill itself genuinely.

What characterizes the passionate man is that he sets up the object as an absolute, not, like the serious man, as a thing detached from himself, but as a thing disclosed by his subjectivity. There are transitions between the serious and passion. A goal which was first willed in the name of the serious can become an object of passion; inversely, a passionate attachment can wither into a serious relationship. But real passion asserts the subjectivity of its involvement. In amorous passion particularly, one does not want the beloved being to be admired objectively; one prefers to think her unknown, unrecognized; the lover thinks that his appropriation of her is greater if he is alone in revealing her worth. That is the genuine thing offered by all passion. The moment of subjectivity therein vividly asserts itself, in its positive form, in a movement toward the object. It is only when passion has been degraded to an organic need that it ceases to choose itself. But as long as it remains alive it does so because subjectivity is animating it; if not pride, at least complacency and obstinacy. At the same time that it is an assumption of this subjectivity, it is also a disclosure of being. It helps populate the world with desirable objects, with exciting meanings. However, in the passions which we shall call maniacal, to distinguish them from the generous passions, freedom does not find its genuine form. The passionate man seeks possession; he seeks to attain being. The failure and the hell which he creates for himself have been described often enough. He causes certain rare treasures to appear in the world, but he also depopulates it. Nothing exists outside of his stubborn project; therefore nothing can induce him to modify his choices. And having involved his whole life with an external object which can continually escape him, he tragically feels his dependence. Even if it does not definitely disappear, the object never gives itself. The passionate man makes himself a lack of being not that there might *be* being, but in order to be. And he remains at a distance; he is never fulfilled.

That is why though the passionate man inspires a certain admiration, he also inspires a kind of horror at the same time. One admires the pride of a subjectivity which chooses its end without bending itself to any foreign law and the precious brilliance of the object revealed by the force of this assertion. But one also considers the solitude in which this subjectivity encloses itself as

injurious. Having withdrawn into an unusual region of the world, seeking not to communicate with other men, this freedom is realized only as a separation. Any conversation, any relationship with the passionate man is impossible. In the eyes of those who desire a communion of freedom, he therefore appears as a stranger, an obstacle. He opposes an opaque resistance to the movement of freedom which wills itself infinite. The passionate man is not only an inert facticity. He too is on the way to tyranny. He knows that his will emanates only from him, but he can nevertheless attempt to impose it upon others. He authorizes himself to do that by a partial nihilism. Only the object of his passion appears real and full to him. All the rest are insignificant. Why not betray, kill, grow violent? It is never *nothing* that one destroys. The whole universe is perceived only as an ensemble of means or obstacles through which it is a matter of attaining the thing in which one has engaged his being. Not intending his freedom for men, the passionate man does not recognize them as freedoms either. He will not hesitate to treat them as things. If the object of his passion concerns the world in general, this tyranny becomes fanaticism. In all fanatical movements there exists an element of the serious. The values invented by certain men in a passion of hatred, fear, or faith are thought and willed by others as given realities. But there is no serious fanaticism which does not have a passional base, since all adhesion to the serious world is brought about by repressed tendencies and complexes. Thus, maniacal passion represents a damnation for the one who chooses it, and for other men it is one of the forms of separation which disunites freedoms. It leads to struggle and oppression. A man who seeks being far from other men, seeks it against them at the same time that he loses himself.

Yet, a conversion can start within passion itself. The cause of the passionate man's torment is his distance from the object; but he must accept it instead of trying to eliminate it. It is the condition within which the object is disclosed. The individual will then find his joy in the very wrench which separates him from the being of which he makes himself a lack. Thus, in the letters of Mademoiselle de Lespinasse there is constant passing from grief to the assumption of this grief. The lover describes her tears and her tortures, but she asserts that she loves this unhappiness. It is also a source of delight for her. She likes the other to appear as another through her separation. It pleases her to exalt, by her very suffering, that strange existence which she chooses to set up as worthy of any sacrifice. It is only as something strange, forbidden, as something free, that the other is revealed as an other. And to love him genuinely is to love him in his otherness and in that freedom by which he escapes. Love is then renunciation of all possession, of all confusion. One renounces being in order that there may be that being which one is not. Such generosity, moreover, can not be exercised on behalf of any object whatsoever. One can not love a pure thing in its independence and its separation, for the thing does not have positive independence. If a man prefers the land he has discovered to the possession of this land, a painting or a statue to their

material presence, it is insofar as they appear to him as possibilities open to other men. Passion is converted to genuine freedom only if one destines his existence to other existences through the being – whether thing or man – at which he aims, without hoping to entrap it in the destiny of the in-itself.

Thus, we see that no existence can be validly fulfilled if it is limited to itself. It appeals to the existence of others. The idea of such a dependence is frightening, and the separation and multiplicity of existants raises highly disturbing problems. One can understand that men who are aware of the risks and the inevitable element of failure involved in any engagement in the world attempt to fulfill themselves outside of the world. Man is permitted to separate himself from this world by contemplation, to think about it, to create it anew. Some men, instead of building their existence upon the indefinite unfolding of time, propose to assert it in its eternal aspect and to achieve it as an absolute. They hope, thereby, to surmount the ambiguity of their condition. Thus, many intellectuals seek their salvation either in critical thought or creative activity.

We have seen that the serious contradicts itself by the fact that not everything can be taken seriously. It slips into a partial nihilism. But nihilism is unstable. It tends to return to the positive. Critical thought attempts to militate everywhere against all aspects of the serious but without foundering in the anguish of pure negation. It sets up a superior, universal, and timeless value, objective truth. And, correlatively, the critic defines himself positively as the independence of the mind. Crystallizing the negative movement of the criticism of values into a positive reality, he also crystallizes the negativity proper to all mind into a positive presence. Thus, he thinks that he himself escapes all earthly criticism. He does not have to choose between the highway and the native, between America and Russia, between production and freedom. He understands, dominates, and rejects, in the name of total truth, the necessarily partial truths which every human engagement discloses. But ambiguity is at the heart of his very attitude, for the independent man is still a man with his particular situation in the world, and what he defines as objective truth is the object of his own choice. His criticisms fall into the world of particular men. He does not merely describe. He takes sides. If he does not assume the subjectivity of his judgment, he is inevitably caught in the trap of the serious. Instead of the independent mind he claims to be, he is only the shameful servant of a cause to which he has not chosen to rally.

The artist and the writer force themselves to surmount existence in another way. They attempt to realize it as an absolute. What makes their effort genuine is that they do not propose to attain being. They distinguish themselves thereby from an engineer or a maniac. It is existence which they are trying to pin down and make eternal. The word, the stroke, the very marble indicate the

object insofar as it is an absence. Only, in the work of art the lack of being returns to the positive. Time is stopped, clear forms and finished meanings rise up. In this return, existence is confirmed and establishes its own justification. This is what Kant said when he defined art as “a finality without end.” By virtue of the fact that he has thus set up an absolute object, the creator is then tempted to consider himself as absolute. He justifies the world and therefore thinks he has no need of anyone to justify himself. If the work becomes an idol whereby the artist thinks that he is fulfilling himself as being, he is closing himself up in the universe of the serious; he is falling into the illusion which Hegel exposed when he described the race of “intellectual animals.”

There is no way for a man to escape from this world. It is in this world that – avoiding the pitfalls we have just pointed out – he must realize himself morally. Freedom must project itself toward its own reality through a content whose value it establishes. An end is valid only by a return to the freedom which established it and which willed itself through this end. But this will implies that freedom is not to be engulfed in any goal; neither is it to dissipate itself vainly without aiming at a goal. It is not necessary for the subject to seek to be, but it must desire that there *be* being. To will oneself free and to will that there be *being* are one and the same choice, the choice that man makes of himself as a presence in the world. We can neither say that the free man wants freedom in order to desire being, nor that he wants the disclosure of being by freedom. These are two aspects of a single reality. And whichever be the one under consideration, they both imply the bond of each man with all others.

This bond does not immediately reveal itself to everybody. A young man wills himself free. He wills that there be being. This spontaneous liberality which casts him ardently into the world can ally itself to what is commonly called egoism. Often the young man perceives only that aspect of his relationship to others whereby others appear as enemies. In the preface to *The Inner Experience* Georges Bataille emphasizes very forcefully that each individual wants to be All. He sees in every other man and particularly in those whose existence is asserted with most brilliance, a limit, a condemnation of himself. “Each consciousness,” said Hegel, “seeks the death of the other.” And indeed at every moment others are stealing the whole world away from me. The first movement is to hate them.

But this hatred is naive, and the desire immediately struggles against itself. If I were really everything there would be nothing beside me; the world would be empty. There would be nothing to possess, and I myself would be nothing. If he is reasonable, the young man immediately understands that by taking the world away from me, others also give it to me, since a thing is given to me only by the movement which snatches it from me. To will that there be being is also to will

that there be men by and for whom the world is endowed with human significations. One can reveal the world only on a basis revealed by other men. No project can be defined except by its interference with other projects. To make being “be” is to communicate with others by means of being.

This truth is found in another form when we say that freedom can not will itself without aiming at an open future. The ends which it gives itself must be unable to be transcended by any reflection, but only the freedom of other men can extend them beyond our life. I have tried to show in *Pyrrhus and Cineas* that every man needs the freedom of other men and, in a sense, always wants it, even though he may be a tyrant; the only thing he fails to do is to assume honestly the consequences of such a wish. Only the freedom of others keeps each one of us from hardening in the absurdity of facticity. And if we are to believe the Christian myth of creation, God himself was in agreement on this point with the existentialist doctrine since, in the words of an anti-fascist priest, “He had such respect for man that He created him free.”

Thus, it can be seen to what an extent those people are mistaken – or are lying – who try to make of existentialism a solipsism, like Nietzsche, would exalt the bare will to power. According to this interpretation, as widespread as it is erroneous, the individual, knowing himself and choosing himself as the creator of his own values, would seek to impose them on others. The result would be a conflict of opposed wills enclosed in their solitude. But we have seen that, on the contrary, to the extent that passion, pride, and the spirit of adventure lead to this tyranny and its conflicts, existentialist ethics condemns them; and it does so not in the name of an abstract law, but because, if it is true that every project emanates from subjectivity, it is also true that this subjective movement establishes by itself a surpassing of subjectivity. Man can find a justification of his own existence only in the existence of other men. Now, he needs such a justification; there is no escaping it. Moral anxiety does not come to man from without; he finds within himself the anxious question, “What’s the use?” Or, to put it better, he himself is this urgent interrogation. He flees it only by fleeing himself, and as soon as he exists he answers. It may perhaps be said that it is for himself that he is moral, and that such an attitude is egotistical. But there is no ethics against which this charge, which immediately destroys itself, can not be leveled; for how can I worry about what does not concern me? I concern others and they concern me. There we have an irreducible truth. The me-others relationship is as indissoluble as the subject-object relationship.

At the same time the other charge which is often directed at existentialism also collapses: of being a formal doctrine, incapable of proposing any content to the freedom which it wants engaged. To will oneself free is also to will others free. This will is not an abstract formula. It

points out to each person concrete action to be achieved. But the others are separate, even opposed, and the man of good will sees concrete and difficult problems arising in his relations with them. It is this positive aspect of morality that we are now going to examine.