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 EXISTENTIALISM: REMARKS ON JEAN-PAUL SARTRE'S  
*L'ÊTRE ET LE NÉANT\**

## INTRODUCTION

"The following pages deal with the sentiment of absurdity which prevails in our world." This opening sentence of Albert Camus' *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* conveys the climate in which Existentialism originates. Camus does not belong to the existentialist school, but the basic experience which permeates his thought is also at the root of Existentialism. The time is that of the totalitarian terror: the Nazi regime is at the height of its power; France is occupied by the German armies. The values and standards of western civilization are coordinated and superseded by the reality of the fascist system. Once again, thought is thrown back upon itself by a reality which contradicts all promises and ideas, which refutes rationalism as well as religion, idealism as well as materialism. Once again, thought finds itself in the Cartesian situation and asks for the one certain and evident truth which may make it still possible to live. The question does not aim at any abstract idea but at the individual's concrete existence: what is the certain and evident experience which can provide the foundation for his life here and now, in this world?

Like Descartes, this philosophy finds the foundation in the self certainty of the *Cogito*, in the consciousness of the *Ego*. But whereas for Descartes the self-certainty of the *Cogito* revealed a rational universe, governed by meaningful laws and mechanisms, the *Cogito* now is thrown into an "absurd" world in which the brute fact of death and the irretrievable process of Time deny all meaning. The Cartesian subject, conscious of its power, faced an objective world which rewarded calculation, conquest, and domination; now the subject itself has become absurd and its world void of purpose and hope. The Cartesian *res cogitans* was opposed by a *res extensa* which responded to the former's knowledge and action; now the subject exists in an iron circle of frustration and failure. The Cartesian world, although held together by its own rationality, made allowance for a God who cannot deceive; now the world is godless in its very essence and leaves no room for any transcendental refuge.

The reconstruction of thought on the ground of absurdity does not lead to irrationalism. This philosophy is no revolt against reason; it does

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not teach abnegation or the *credo quia absurdum*. In the universal destruction and disillusion, one thing maintains itself: the relentless clarity and lucidity of the mind which refuses all shortcuts and escapes, the constant awareness that life has to be lived "without appeal" and without protection. Man accepts the challenge and seeks his freedom and happiness in a world where there is no hope, sense, progress, and morrow. This life is nothing but "consciousness and revolt," and defiance is its only truth. Camus' *Mythe de Sisyphe* recaptures the climate of Nietzsche's philosophy:

"L'homme absurde entrevoit un univers brûlant et glacé, transparent et limité, où rien n'est possible mais tout est donné, passé lequel c'est l'effondrement et le néant."<sup>1</sup>

Thought moves in the night, but it is the night

"du désespoir qui reste lucide, nuit polaire, veille de l'esprit, d'où se lèvera peut-être cette clarté blanche et intacte qui dessine chaque objet dans la lumière de l'intelligence."<sup>2</sup>

The experience of the "absurd world" gives rise to a new and extreme rationalism which separates this mode of thought from all fascist ideology. But the new rationalism defies systematization. Thought is held in abeyance between the "sentiment of absurdity" and its comprehension, between art and philosophy. Here, the ways part: Camus rejects existential philosophy: the latter must of necessity "explain" the inexplicable, rationalize the absurdity and thus falsify its reality. To him, the only adequate expression is living the absurd life, and the artistic creation, which refuses to rationalize ("raisonner le concret") and which "covers with images that which makes no sense" ("ce qui n'a pas de raison"). Sartre, on the other hand, attempts to develop the new experience into a philosophy of the concrete human existence: to elaborate the structure of "being in an absurd world" and the ethics of "living without appeal."

The development of Sartre's Existentialism spans the period of the war, the Liberation, and reconstruction. Neither the triumph nor the collapse of fascism produce any fundamental change in the existentialist conception. In the change of the political systems, in war and peace, before and after the totalitarian terror—the structure of the "réalité humaine" remains the same. "Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose." The historical absurdity which consists in the fact that, after the defeat of fascism, the

<sup>1</sup> *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, 19th ed., (Paris, 1946), pp. 83 f. "Absurd man envisages a burning and icy universe, transparent and limited, where nothing is possible but everything is given, beyond which is extinction and the void."

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 89 f. "of desparation which remains lucid, polar night, eve of the mind out of which will perhaps rise that white and integral clarity which designs every object in the light of the intellect."

world did not collapse, but relapsed into its previous forms, that it did not leap into the realm of freedom but restored with honor the old management—this absurdity lives in the existentialist conception. But it lives in the existentialist conception as a metaphysical, not as a historical fact. The experience of the absurdity of the world, of man's failure and frustration appears as the experience of his ontological condition. As such, it transcends his historical condition. Sartre defines Existentialism as a doctrine according to which "existence precedes and perpetually creates the essence."<sup>3</sup> But in his philosophy, the existence of man, in creating his essence, is itself determined by the perpetually identical ontological structure of man, and the various concrete forms of man's existence serve only as examples of this structure. Sartre's existential analysis is a strictly philosophical one in the sense that it abstracts from the historical factors which constitute the empirical concreteness: the latter merely illustrates Sartre's metaphysical and meta-historical conceptions. In so far as Existentialism is a philosophical doctrine, it remains an idealistic doctrine: it hypostatizes specific historical conditions of human existence into ontological and metaphysical characteristics. Existentialism thus becomes part of the very ideology which it attacks, and its radicalism is illusory. Sartre's *L'Être et le Néant*, the philosophical foundation of Existentialism, is an ontological-phenomenological treatise on human freedom and could as such come out under the German occupation (1943). The essential freedom of man, as Sartre sees it, remains the same before, during, and after the totalitarian enslavement of man. For freedom is the very structure of human being and cannot be annihilated even by the most adverse conditions: man is free even in the hands of the executioner. Is this not Luther's comforting message of Christian liberty?

Sartre's book draws heavily on the philosophy of German idealism, in which Luther's Protestantism has found its transcendental stabilization. At the outset, Sartre's concept of the free subject is a reinterpretation of Descartes' *Cogito*, but its development follows the tradition of German rather than French rationalism. Moreover Sartre's book is in large parts a restatement of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind* and Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*. French Existentialism revives many of the intellectual tendencies which were prevalent in the Germany of the 'twenties and which came to naught in the Nazi system.

But while these aspects seem to commit Existentialism to the innermost tendencies of bourgeois culture, others seem to point into a different direction. Sartre himself has protested against the interpretation of human freedom in terms of an essentially "internal" liberty—an inter-

<sup>3</sup> *Les Lettres Françaises* (Paris, November 24, 1945). See also *L'existentialisme est un humanisme* (Paris, 1946), p. 17.

pretation which his own analysis so strongly suggests—and he has explicitly linked up his philosophy with the theory of the proletarian revolution.<sup>4</sup>

Existentialism thus offers two apparently contradictory aspects: one the modern reformulation of the perennial ideology, the transcendental stabilization of human freedom in the face of its actual enslavement; the other the revolutionary theory which implies the negation of this entire ideology. The two conflicting aspects reflect the inner movement of existentialist thought<sup>5</sup> which reaches its object, the concrete human existence, only where it ceases to analyze it in terms of the “free subject” and describes it in terms of what it has actually become: a “thing” in a reified world. At the end of the road, the original position is reversed: the realization of human freedom appears, not in the *res cogitans*, the “Pour-soi,” but in the *res extensa*, in the body as thing. Here, Existentialism reaches the point where philosophical ideology would turn into revolutionary theory. But at the same point, Existentialism arrests this movement and leads it back into the ideological ontology.

The elucidation of this hidden movement requires a critical restatement of some of the basic conceptions of *L'Être et le Néant*.

## I

*L'Être et le Néant* starts with the distinction of two types of being—Being-for-itself (*Pour-soi*; consciousness, *cogito*) and Being-in-itself (*En-soi*). The latter (roughly identical with the world of things, objectivity) is characterized by having no relation to itself, being what it is, plainly and simply, beyond all becoming, change, and temporality (which emerge only with the *Pour-soi*), in the mode of utter contingency. In contrast, the Being-for-itself, identical with the human being, is the free subject which continually “creates” its own existence; Sartre’s whole book is devoted to its analysis. The analysis proceeds from the question as to the “relationship” (*rapport*) between these two types of being. Following Heidegger, subjectivity and objectivity are understood, not as two separate entities between which a relationship must only be established, but as essential “togetherness,” and the question aims at the full and concrete structure of this togetherness.

“Le concret ne saurait être que la totalité synthétique dont le consciencce comme le phénomène [l’être-en-soi] ne constituent que des moments. Le concret, c’est l’homme dans le monde. . . .”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> “Matérialisme et Révolution,” *Les Temps Modernes*, I, nos. 9 and 10, (Paris, 1946).

<sup>5</sup> Unless otherwise stated, “existentialist” and “Existentialism” refer only to Sartre’s philosophy.

<sup>6</sup> *L'Être et le Néant*, 5 edition (Paris, 1946), p. 38. “The concrete can be only the synthetic totality of which consciousness as well as phenomenon (Being-in-itself) constitute but moments. The concrete—that is man in the world. . . .”

The question thus aims at the full and concrete structure of the human being as being-in-the-world (*la réalité humaine*).

In order to elucidate this structure, the analysis orients itself on certain typical "human attitudes" (*conduites exemplaires*). The first of these is the attitude of questioning (*l'attitude interrogative*), the specific human attitude of interrogating, reflecting on himself and his situation at any given moment. The interrogation implies a threefold (potential) negativity: the not-knowing, the permanent possibility of a negative answer, and the limitation expressed in the affirmative answer: "It is thus and not otherwise." The interrogative attitude thus brings to the fore the fact that man is surrounded by and permeated with negativity:

"C'est la possibilité permanente de non-être, hors de nous et en nous, qui conditionne nos questions sur l'être."<sup>7</sup>

However, the negativity implied in the interrogative attitude serves only as an example and indication of the fundamental fact that negativity surrounds and permeates man's entire existence and all his attitudes:

"La condition nécessaire pour qu'il soit possible de dire *non*, c'est que le non-être soit une présence perpétuelle, en nous et en dehors de nous, c'est que le néant hante l'être."<sup>8</sup>

Negativity originates with and constantly accompanies the human being, manifesting itself in a whole series of negations (*néantissations*) with which the human being experiences, comprehends, and acts upon himself and the world. The totality of these negations constitutes the very being of the subject: man exists "comme mode perpétuel d'arrachement à ce qui est";<sup>9</sup> he transcends himself as well as his objects toward his and their possibilities, he is always "beyond" his situation, "wanting" his full reality. By the same token, man does not simply exist like a thing (*en soi*) but makes himself and his world exist, "creates" himself and his world at any moment and in any situation.

This characterization of the "réalité humaine" (which is hardly more than a restatement of the idealistic conception of the Cogito or Selfconsciousness, especially in the form in which the *Phenomenology of Mind* develops this conception) furnishes the fundamental terms of Sartre's Existentialism—the terms which guide the subsequent development of his philosophy. There is first of all the identification of the human being with

<sup>7</sup> Page 40. "It is the permanent possibility of not-being, outside of us and in us, which conditions our questions about being."

<sup>8</sup> Page 47. "The necessary condition which makes it possible to say 'no' is that the not-being is perpetually present, in us and outside of us, is that the void haunts being."

<sup>9</sup> Page 73. "as perpetually detaching himself from what is."

liberty. The series of negations by which man constitutes himself and his world at the same time constitutes his essential freedom:

la liberté "surgit de la négation des appels du monde, elle apparaît dès que je me dégage du monde ou je m'étais engagé, pour m'appréhender moi-même comme conscience. . . ."<sup>10</sup>

Human freedom thus conceived is not one quality of man among others, nor something which man possesses or lacks according to his historical situation, but is the human being itself and as such:

"Ce que nous appelons liberté est donc impossible à distinguer de l'être de la 'réalité humaine.' L'homme n'est point d'abord pour être libre ensuite, mais il n'y a pas de différence entre l'être de l'homme et son être-libre."<sup>11</sup>

Secondly, from the identification of the human being with freedom follows the full and unqualified responsibility of man for his being. In order to concretize his idea of freedom and responsibility, Sartre adapts Heidegger's emphasis on the *Geworfenheit* of man into a pre-given "situation." Man always finds himself and his world in a situation which appears as an essentially external one (the situation of his family, class, nation, race, etc.). Likewise, the objects of his environment are not his own: they were manufactured as commodities; their form and their use are pre-given and standardized. However, this essential "contingency" of man's situation is the very condition and life of his freedom and responsibility. His contingent situation becomes "his" in so far as he "engages" himself in it, accepts or rejects it. No power in heaven or on earth can force him to abdicate his freedom: he himself, and he alone is to decide and choose what he is.

Thirdly, man is by definition (that is to say, by virtue of the fact that he is, as "être-pour-soi," the permanent realization of his possibilities) nothing but self-creation. His Being is identical with his activity (action), or rather with his (free) acts. "L'homme est ce qu'il fait," and, vice versa, everything that is is a "human enterprise."

"Un homme s'engage dans sa vie, dessine sa figure, et en dehors de cette figure, il n'y a rien. . . . Un homme n'est rien d'autre qu'une série d'entreprises, il est la somme, l'organisation, l'ensemble des relations qui constituent ces entreprises."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Page 77. Liberty "arises with the negation of the appeals of the world, it appears from the moment when I detach myself from the world where I had engaged myself so that I perceive myself as consciousness."

<sup>11</sup> Page 61. "That which we call liberty is therefore undistinguishable from the being of the 'human reality.' Man does not first exist in order to be free subsequently, but there is no difference between his being and his free-being (being-free)."

<sup>12</sup> *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme, loc. cit.*, pp. 57 f. "Man engages in his life, designs its shape, and outside this shape, there is nothing. . . . Man is nothing else

Human existence is at any moment a "project" that is being realized, freely designed and freely executed by man himself, or, man's existence is nothing but his own fundamental project. This dynamics is based on the fact that man's actual situation never coincides with his possibilities, that his Being is essentially being-in-want-of (*manque*). However, the want is not want of something, so that the want would disappear with its satisfaction; it is the manifestation of the basic negativity of the human being:

"La réalité humaine n'est pas quelque chose qui existerait d'abord pour manquer par après de ceci ou de cela: elle existe d'abord comme manque et en liaison synthétique immédiate avec ce qu'elle manque. . . . La réalité se saisit dans sa venue à l'existence comme être incomplet. . . . La réalité humaine est dépassement perpétuel vers une coïncidence qui n'est jamais donnée."<sup>13</sup>

The existentialist dynamics is thus not an aimless and senseless one: the "project fundamental" which is man's existence aims at the ever lacking coincidence with himself, at his own completeness and totality. In other words, the *Pour-soi* constantly strives to become *En-soi*, to become the stable and lasting foundation of his own being. But this project, which would make the *Pour-soi* an *En-soi* and vice versa, is eternally condemned to frustration, and this ontological frustration shapes and permeates the entire Being of man:

"La réalité humaine est souffrante dans son être, parce qu'elle surgit à l'être comme perpétuellement hantée par une totalité qu'elle est sans pouvoir l'être, puisque justement elle ne pourrait atteindre l'en-soi sans se perdre comme pour-soi. Elle est donc par nature conscience malheureuse. . . ."<sup>14</sup>

Sartre's ontological analysis has herewith reached its center: the determination of the human being as frustration, *Scheitern*, "échec." All fundamental human relationships, the entire "human enterprise" are haunted by this frustration. However, precisely because frustration is permanent and inevitable (since it is the ontological characteristic of the human being), it is also the very foundation and condition of human freedom. The latter is what it is only in so far as it "engages" man within his contingent situa-

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but a series of enterprises (undertakings), he is the sum total, the organization, the ensemble of the relationships which constitute these enterprises."

<sup>13</sup> *L'Être et le Néant*, pp. 132 f. "Human reality is not something which first exists in order to want for this or that later; it exists as want and in close synthetic union with what it wants. . . . In its coming into being, (human) reality is cognizant of itself as an incomplete being. . . . Human reality is a perpetual reaching for a coincidence which is never accomplished."

<sup>14</sup> Page 134. "Human reality suffers in its being because it emerges into existence as though perpetually haunted by a totality which it is without being able to be it, since in effect it cannot attain Being-in-itself without losing Being-for-itself. It is therefore essentially unhappy consciousness."

tion, which in turn, since it is a pre-given situation, prevents him once and for all from ever becoming the founder of his own Being-for-himself. The circle of ontological identifications is thus closed: it combines Being and Nothing, freedom and frustration, self-responsible choice and contingent determination. The *coincidentia oppositorum* is accomplished, not through a dialectical process, but through their simple establishment as ontological characteristics. As such, they are transtemporally simultaneous and structurally identical.

The ontological analysis of the *l'Être-pour-soi* furnishes the framework for the interpretation of the *l'Existence d'Autrui*, of the Other. This transition presents a decisive methodological problem. Sartre has followed so closely the idealistic conception of Self-Consciousness (*Cogito*) as the transcendental origin and "creator" of all Being that he constantly faces the danger of transcendental solipsism. He takes up the challenge in an excellent critique of Husserl and Heidegger (and Hegel), in which he shows that their attempts to establish the Being of the Other as an independent ontological fact fail, that in all of them the existence of the Other is more or less absorbed into the existence of the Ego.<sup>15</sup> Sartre himself renounces all efforts to derive ontologically the existence of the Other:

"L'existence d'autrui a la nature d'un fait contingent et irréductible. On rencontre autrui, on le ne constitue pas."<sup>16</sup>

However, he continues, the *Cogito* provides the only point of departure for the understanding of the existence of the Other because all "fait contingent," all "nécessité de fait" is such only for and by virtue of the *Cogito*:

"Il faut que le *Cogito*, examiné une fois de plus, me jette hors de lui sur autrui. . . . C'est au Pour-soi qu'il faut demander de nous livrer le Pour-autrui, à l'immanence absolue qu'il faut demander de nous rejeter dans la transcendance absolue."<sup>17</sup>

The experience of the *Cogito* which establishes the independent existence of the Other is that of "being-looked-at by another (man)." The relation of being-seen by another (man) constitutes, for the *Cogito*, "l'existence d'autrui":

"Ce à quoi se réfère mon appréhension d'autrui dans le monde comme étant probablement un homme, c'est à ma possibilité permanent d'être-vue-par-lui. . . . L'autrui est, par principe, celui qui me regarde . . ."<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Pages 288 f.

<sup>16</sup> Page 307. "The existence of the Other has the nature of a contingent and irreducible fact. The Other is encountered; he is not constituted (by the Ego)."

<sup>17</sup> Pages 308 f. "The *Cogito* (examined once again) must cast me outside of itself onto the Other. . . . We must ask the Being-for-itself to give us the Being-for-another; absolute immanence must cast us back into absolute transcendence."

<sup>18</sup> Page 315. "My perception of the Other in the world as probably being (a) man relates to my permanent possibility of being-seen-by-him. . . . On principle, the Other is he who looks at me."

"Le regard d'autrui" becomes constitutive of the fundamental inter-human relationships. Sartre illustrates this by the example of a jealous lover who peeps through a keyhole. In this situation, he suddenly feels himself seen by another man. With this glance, he becomes somebody whom another (man) knows in his innermost being, who is that which the other sees. His own possibilities are taken away from him (he cannot hide where he intended to hide, he cannot know what he desired to know, etc.); his entire world at once has a new, different focus, structure, and meaning: it emerges as the other's world and as a world-for-the-other. His being thus emerges, in a strict sense, as being "at the liberty" of the other: from now on,

"il s'agit de mon être tel qu'il s'écrit dans et par la liberté d'autrui. Tout ce passe comme si j'avais une dimension d'être dont j'étais séparé par un néant radical: et ce néant, c'est la liberté d'autrui."<sup>19</sup>

The other's glance turns me into an object, turns my existence into "nature," alienates my possibilities, "steals" my world.

"Par le pur surgissement de son être, j'ai un dehors, j'ai nature; ma chute originelle, c'est l'existence de l'autre."<sup>20</sup>

The appearance of the Other thus transforms the world of the Ego into a world of conflict, competition, alienation, "réification." The Other, that is "la mort cachée de mes possibilités"; the Other, that is he who usurps my world, who makes me an "object of appreciation and appraisal," who gives me my "value."

"Ainsi, être vu me constitue comme un être sans défense pour une liberté qui n'est pas ma liberté. C'est en ce sens que nous pouvons nous considérer comme des 'esclaves,' en tant que nous apparaissions à autrui. Mais cet esclavage n'est pas le résultat—historique et susceptible d'être surmonté—d'une vie à la forme abstraite de la conscience."<sup>21</sup>

This conception of the Other as the irreconcilable antagonist of the Ego now serves as the basis for Sartre's interpretation of the interhuman relationships. They are primarily corporal relationships (as already indicated

<sup>19</sup> Page 320. "it is a question of my being as it is inscribed in and through the liberty of the Other. Everything occurs as though I possessed a dimension of being from which I was separated by a profound void, and this void is the liberty of the Other."

<sup>20</sup> Page 321. "By the very emergence of his existence, I have an appearance, a nature; the existence of the Other is my original sin."

<sup>21</sup> Page 326. "Thus, being seen constitutes me as being without any defense against a liberty which is not my liberty. In this sense we may consider ourselves as 'slaves' in so far as we appear to the Other. But this bondage is not the historical and surmountable result of the life of an abstract consciousness."

by the constitutive role attributed to the "regard"). However, the body enters these relationships not merely as a physical-biological "thing" but as the manifestation of the individuality and contingency of the Ego in his "rapport transcendant" with the world.<sup>21a</sup> The original experience of the Other as the source of alienation and reification calls for two fundamental reactions which constitute the two fundamental types of interhuman relationships: (1) the attempt, on the part of the Ego, to deny the liberty and mastery of the Other and to make him into an objective thing, totally dependent on the Ego; or, (2) to assimilate his liberty, to accept it as the foundation of the Ego's own liberty and thereby to regain the free Ego.<sup>22</sup> The first attitude leads to Sadism, the second to Masochism. But the essential frustration which marks all existential "projects" of the Ego also characterizes these attempts: the complete enslavement of the Other transforms him into a thing, annihilates him as the (independent) Other and thus annihilates the very goal which the Ego desired to attain. Similarly, the complete assimilation to the Other transforms the Ego into a thing, annihilates it as a (free) subject and thus annihilates the very freedom which the Ego desired to regain. The frustration suffered in the sadistic attitude leads to the adoption of the masochistic attitude, and vice versa:

"Chacune d'elles est la mort de l'autre, c'est-à-dire que l'échec de l'une motive l'adoption de l'autre. Ainsi n'y a-t-il pas dialectique de mes relations envers autrui, mais cercle—encore que chaque tentative s'enrichisse de l'échec de l'autre."<sup>23</sup>

The two fundamental human relationships produce and destroy themselves "en cercle."<sup>24</sup>

The only remaining possible attitude toward the Other is that which aims directly at his utter destruction, namely, hate. However, this attitude too fails to achieve the desired result: the liberation of the Ego. For even after the death of the Other (or the Others), he (or they) remain as "having been" and thus continue to haunt the Ego's conscience.

The conclusion: since

"toutes les conduites complexes des hommes les uns envers les autres ne sont que des enrichissements de ces deux attitudes (et de la haine),"<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21a</sup> Pages 391 ff.

<sup>22</sup> Page 430.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* "Each of them implies the death of the other, that is, the failure of one motivates the adoption of the other. Therefore, my relations with the Other are not dialectical but circular, although each attempt is enriched by the failure of the other."

<sup>24</sup> Page 484.

<sup>25</sup> Page 477. "all the complex attitudes of men toward each other are only variations of these two attitudes (and of hate)."

there is no breaking out of the circle of frustration. On the other hand, man *must* "engage" in one of these attitudes because his very reality consists in nothing but such "engagement." Thus, after the failure of each attempt,

"il ne reste plus au pour-soi qu'à rentrer dans le cercle et à se laisser indéfiniment ballotter de l'une à l'autre des deux attitudes fondamentales."<sup>26</sup>

Here, the image of Sisyphus and his absurd task appears most naturally as the very symbol of man's existence. Here, too, Sartre deems it appropriate to add in a footnote that "these considerations do not exclude the possibility of a morality of liberation and salvation"; however, such a morality requires a "radical conversion, which we cannot discuss at this place."

## II

The main ontological argument is concluded by this analysis of the fundamental interhuman relationships; the remaining part of the book is taken up by a synopsis of the "réalité humaine" as it has emerged in the preceding interpretation. The synopsis is guided by the concept of freedom. The ontological analysis had started with the identification of Ego (Cogito) and freedom. The subsequent development of the existential characteristics of the Ego had shown how his freedom is inextricably tied up within the contingency of his "situation," and how all attempts to make himself the free foundation of his existence are eternally condemned to frustration. The last part of Sartre's book resumes the discussion at this point in order to justify finally, in the face of these apparent contradictions, the ontological identification of human being and freedom.

For Sartre, the justification cannot be that which is traditionally featured in idealistic philosophy, namely, the distinction between transcendental and empirical freedom. This solution cannot suffice for him because his analysis of the Ego does not remain within the transcendental-ontological dimension. Ever since his Ego, in the Third Part of his book, had to acknowledge the existence of the Other as a plain "nécessité de fait," his philosophy had left the realm of pure ontology and moved within the ontic-empirical world.

Sartre thus cannot claim that his philosophy of freedom is a transcendental-ontological one and therefore neither committed nor equipped to go into the (empirical) actuality of human freedom. Quite in contrast to Heidegger (whose existential analysis claims to remain within the limits of

<sup>26</sup> Page 484. "there is no alternative left for the Being-for-itself but to return into the circle and to be tossed about indefinitely from one to the other of these two fundamental attitudes."

pure ontology), Sartre's philosophy professes to be an "-ism," Existentialism, that is to say, a *Weltanschauung* which involves a definite attitude toward life, a definite morality, "une doctrine d'action."<sup>27</sup> Sartre must therefore show the actuality of his conception of human freedom, and, with it, the actuality of the entire "existentialist" conception of man. The last part of *L'Être et le Néant* is chiefly dedicated to this task.

Sartre attempts to demonstrate that the ontological definition actually defines the "réalité humaine," that man is in *reality* the free being-for-himself which the existential ontology posits.

We have seen that, according to Sartre, man, as a Being-for-itself that does not simply exist but exists only in so far as it "realizes" itself, is essentially act, action, activity.

"L'homme est libre parce qu'il n'est pas soi mais présence à soi. L'être qui est ce qu'il est ne saurait être libre. La liberté c'est précisément le néant qui est été au coeur de l'homme et qui contraint la réalité humaine à *se faire* au lieu d'être."<sup>28</sup>

This "se faire" applies to every single moment in man's life: whatever he does or does not do, whatever he is or is not—he himself has "chosen" it, and his choice was absolutely and perfectly free:

"Notre être est précisément notre choix original."<sup>29</sup>

As against this proclamation of the absolute freedom of man, the objection arises immediately that man is in reality determined by his specific socio-historical situation, which in turn determines the scope and content of his liberty and the range of his "choice."

"La réalité humaine," that is, for example, a French worker under the German occupation, or a sales clerk in New York. His liberty is limited, and his choice is prescribed to such an extent that their interpretation in the existentialist terms appears like mere mockery. Sartre accepts the challenge and sets out to prove that even in a situation of extreme determinateness, man is and remains absolutely free. True, he says, the worker may live in a state of actual enslavement, oppression, and exploitation, but he has freely "chosen" this state, and he is free to change it at any moment. He has freely chosen it because "enslavement," "oppression," "exploitation" have meaning only for and by the "Pour-soi" which has posited and accepted these "values" and suffers them. And he is free to change his

<sup>27</sup> *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme*, *loc. cit.*, p. 95.

<sup>28</sup> *L'Être et le Néant*, p. 516. "Man is free because he is not merely himself but presence to himself. The being which (merely) is what it is cannot be free. Freedom is, actually, the void which is in man's heart and which forces the human reality to *create itself* rather than to *be*."

<sup>29</sup> Page 539. "Our existence is, actually, our original choice."

condition at any moment because these values will cease to exist for him as soon as he ceases to posit, accept, and suffer them. Sartre understands this freedom as a strictly individual liberty, the decision to change the situation as a strictly individual project, and the act of changing is a strictly individual enterprise.

The fact that for the individual worker such individual action would mean loss of his job and probably lead to starvation, imprisonment, and even death, does not invalidate his absolute freedom, for it is again a matter of free choice to value life and security higher than starvation, imprisonment, and death. The existentialist proposition thus leads inevitably to the reaffirmation of the old idealistic conception that man is free even in chains, or, as Sartre formulates it,

“mais les tenailles du bourreau ne nous dispensent pas d’être libre.”<sup>30</sup>

However, Sartre does not want to have this proposition interpreted in the sense of a merely “internal” freedom. The slave is literally and actually free to break his chains, for the very meaning (“sens”) of his chains reveals itself only in the light of the goal which he chooses: to remain a slave or to risk the worst in order to liberate himself from enslavement.

“S’il choisit, par exemple, la révolte, l’esclavage, loin d’être d’abord un obstacle à cette révolte, ne prend son sens et son coefficient d’adversité que par elle.”<sup>31</sup>

All adversities, obstacles, limitations to our liberty are thus posited by and emerge (“survir”) with ourselves; they are parts of the free “project” which is our existence:<sup>32</sup>

“Le coefficient d’adversité des choses . . . ne saurait être un argument contre notre liberté, car c’est *par nous*, c’est-à-dire par la position préalable d’une fin que surgit se coefficient d’adversité. Tel rocher, qui manifeste une résistance profonde si je veux le déplacer, sera, au contraire, une aide précieuse si je veux l’escalader pour contempler le paysage.”<sup>33</sup>

Sartre does not hesitate to push this conception to its last consequences. Being a Frenchman, a Southerner, a worker, a Jew—is the result of the

<sup>30</sup> Page 587. “but the executioner’s tools cannot dispense us from being free.”

<sup>31</sup> Page 635. “If, for example, he chooses to revolt, slavery, far from being first an obstacle to this revolt, takes its meaning and its coefficient of adversity only from this revolt.”

<sup>32</sup> Pages 562, 569.

<sup>33</sup> Page 562. “The coefficient of adversity of things . . . cannot be an argument against our freedom because it is *through us*, that is, through the preliminary setting of a goal that this coefficient of adversity emerges. The very rock which displays profound resistance if I wish to change its position, will, on the other hand, be a precious help to me if I wish to climb it in order to contemplate the countryside.”

“Pour-soi’s” own “making.” By the same token, all the restrictions, obstacles, prohibitions which society places upon the Jew “exist” only because and in so far as the Jew “chooses” and accepts them:

“Défense aux Juifs de pénétrer ici,” “Restaurant juif, défense aux Aryens d’entrer,” etc.—ne peut avoir de sens que sur et par le fondement de mon libre choix.”<sup>34</sup> “C’est seulement en reconnaissant la liberté . . . des antisémites et en assumant cet être-juif que je suis pour eux, c’est seulement ainsi que l’être-juif apparaîtra comme limite objective externe de la situation; s’il me plaît, au contraire, de les considérer comme purs objets, mon être-juif disparaît aussitôt pour faire place à la simple conscience (d)être libre transcendance inqualifiable.”<sup>35</sup>

The treatise on human freedom has here reached the point of self-abdication. The persecution of the Jews, and “les tenailles du bourreau” are the terror which is the world today, they are the brute reality of unfreedom. To the existentialist philosopher, however, they appear as examples of the existence of human freedom. The fact that Sartre’s demonstration is ontologically correct and a time-honored and successful feature of idealism only proves the remoteness of this demonstration from the “réalité humaine.” If philosophy, by virtue of its existential-ontological concepts of man or freedom, is capable of demonstrating that the persecuted Jew and the victim of the executioner are and remain absolutely free and masters of a self-responsible choice, then these philosophical concepts have declined to the level of a mere ideology, an ideology which offers itself as a most handy justification for the persecutors and executioners—themselves an important part of the “réalité humaine.” It is true that the “Pour-soi,” *qua* “Pour-soi,” is and remains free in the hands of the numerous executioners who provide the numerous opportunities for exercising existential freedom, but this freedom has shrunk to a point where it is wholly irrelevant and thus cancels itself. The free choice between death and enslavement is neither freedom nor choice, because both alternatives destroy the “réalité humaine” which is supposed to be freedom. Established as the locus of freedom in the midst of a world of totalitarian oppression, the “Pour-soi,” the Cartesian *Cogito*, is no longer the jumping-off point for the conquest of the intellectual and material world, but the last refuge of the individual in an “absurd world” of prostration and failure. In Sartre’s philosophy, this refuge is still equipped with all the parapher-

<sup>34</sup> Page 607. “‘No Jews allowed here,’ ‘Jewish restaurant, Aryans forbidden to enter,’ etc., can only have meaning on and through the foundation of my free choice.”

<sup>35</sup> Page 610. “It is only by recognizing the liberty . . . of the anti-Semites and by assuming this being-Jewish which I represent to them that being-Jewish will appear as the external objective limit of my situation. If, on the other hand, it pleases me to consider them simply as objects, my being-Jewish disappears immediately to give way to the simple consciousness of being a free transcendence.”

nalía which characterized the heydays of individualistic society. The "Pour-soi" appears with the attributes of absolute autonomy, perpetual ownership, and perpetual appropriation (just as the Other appears as the one who usurps, appropriates, and appraises my world, as the "thief" of my possibilities). Behind the nihilistic language of Existentialism lurks the ideology of free competition, free initiative, and equal opportunity. Everybody can "transcend" his situation, carry out his own project: everybody has his absolutely free choice. However adverse the conditions, man must "take it" and make compulsion his self-realization. Everybody is master of his destiny. But in the face of an "absurd world" without meaning and reward, the attributes of the heroic period of bourgeois society assume naturally an absurd and illusory character. Sartre's "Pour-soi" is closer to Stirner's *Einzigiger und sein Eigentum* than to Descartes' *Cogito*. In spite of Sartre's insistence on the Ego's *Geworfenheit* (being thrown into) a pre-given contingent situation, the latter seems to be wholly absorbed by the Ego's ever-transcending power which posits, as its own free project, all the obstacles encountered on its way. True, man is thrown into a "situation" which he himself has not created, and this situation may be such that it "alienates" his freedom, degrades him into a thing. The process of "reification" appears in manifold forms in Sartre's philosophy: as the alienation of my world and my liberty through the Other, as the subordination of the "Pour-soi" to the standardized techniques of every day life,<sup>36</sup> as the interchangeability of the individual.<sup>37</sup> But to Sartre reification as well as its negation are only obstacles on which man's freedom thrives and feeds itself: they become parts of the *Cogito's* existential project, and the whole process once again serves to illustrate the perpetual liberty of the "Pour-soi" which finds only itself in the most alienated situation.

The Self-consciousness that finds itself in its Being-for-Others: Sartre's Existentialism thus revives Hegel's formula for the free and rational condition of man. To Hegel, however, the realization of this condition is only the goal and end of the entire historical process. Sartre takes the ontological shortcut and transforms the process into the metaphysical condition of the "Pour-soi." Sartre accomplishes this transformation by a trick: the term "Pour-soi" covers the We as well as the I; it is the collective as well as the individual self-consciousness.

le Pour-soi "fait qu'il soit daté par ses techniques",<sup>38</sup>  
 "se fait Français, méridional, ouvrier . . .",<sup>39</sup> etc.

<sup>36</sup> Pages 495 ff., 594.

<sup>37</sup> Page 496.

<sup>38</sup> Page 604.

<sup>39</sup> Page 606.

Thus, the "Pour-soi" creates nation, class, class distinctions, etc., makes them parts of his own free "project," and, consequently, is "responsible" for them. This is the fallacious identification of the ontological and historical subject. While it is a truism to say that the *ideas* "nation," "class," etc., arise with and "exist" only for the "Pour-soi," "nation," "class," etc., are not created by the "Pour-soi," but by the action and reaction of specific social groups under specific historical conditions. To be sure, these groups are composed of individuals who may be ontologically characterized as "Pour-soi," but such characterization is totally irrelevant to the understanding of their concreteness. The ontological concept of the "Pour-soi," which defines equally the wage earner and the entrepreneur, the salesclerk and the intellectual, the serf and the landlord, prejudices the analysis of their concrete existence: in so far as the different existential situations are interpreted in terms of the realization of the "Pour-soi," they are reduced to the abstract denominator of a universal essence. In subsuming the various historical subjects under the ontological idea of the "Pour-soi," and making the latter the guiding principle of the existential philosophy, Sartre relegates the specific differences which constitute the very concreteness of human existence to mere manifestations of the universal essence of man—thus offending against his own thesis that "existence creates the essence." Reduced to the role of examples, the concrete situations cannot bridge the gap between the terms of ontology and those of existence. The ontological foundation of Existentialism frustrates its effort to develop a philosophy of the concrete human existence.

The gap between the terms of ontology and those of existence is concealed by the equivocal use of the term "is." Sartre's "is" functions indiscriminately and without mediation as the copula in the definition of the essence of man, and as the predication of his actual condition. In this twofold sense, the "is" occurs in propositions like "Man is free," "is his own project," etc. The fact that, in the empirical reality, man is not free, not his own project, is obliterated by the inclusion of the negation into the definition of "free," "project," etc. But Sartre's concepts are, in spite of his dialectical style and the pervasive role of the negation, decidedly undialectical. In his philosophy, the negation is no force of its own but is *a priori* absorbed into the affirmation. True, in Sartre's analysis, the development of the subject through its negation into the self-conscious realization of its project appears as a process, but the process-character is illusory: the subject moves in a circle.

Existentialist freedom is safe from the tribulations to which man is subjected in the empirical reality. However, in one respect, the empirical reality does affect Sartre's concept of human liberty. Although the freedom which is operative as the very being of the "Pour-soi" accompanies

man in all situations, the scope and degree of his freedom varies in his different situations: it is smallest and dimmest where man is most thoroughly "reified," where he is least "Pour-soi." For example, in situations where he is reduced to the state of a thing, an instrument, where he exists almost exclusively as body, his "Pour-soi" has all but disappeared. But precisely here, where the ontological idea of freedom seems to evaporate together with the "Pour-soi," where it falls almost entirely into the sphere of things—at this point a new image of human freedom and fulfillment arises. We shall now discuss the brief appearance of this image in Sartre's philosophy.

### III

In illustrating the permanent transcendence of the "Pour-soi" beyond every one of its contingent situations (a transcendence which, however free, remains afflicted with the very contingency it transcends), Sartre uses the term "jouer à l'être." He introduces the term in describing the behavior of a "garçon de café." The waiter's behavior exemplifies the manner in which man has to "make himself what he is":<sup>40</sup> every single one of the waiter's motions, attitudes, and gestures shows that he is constantly aware of the obligation to be a waiter and to behave as a waiter, and that he is trying to discharge this obligation. He "is" not a waiter, he rather "makes" himself a waiter. Now "being a waiter" consists of a set of standardized and mechanized motions, attitudes, and gestures which almost amount to being an automaton. Such a set of behavior patterns is expected from a waiter, and he tries to live up to this expectation: he "plays" the waiter, he "plays" his own being. The obligation to be what he is thus becomes a play, a performance, and the freedom of the "Pour-soi" to transcend his contingent condition (being-a-waiter) shows forth as the freedom to play, to perform.

Can the example be generalized so that the transcendence of the Cogito, the realization of its freedom, shows forth as a permanent and ubiquitous play, a "jouer à l'être"? Sartre strongly suggests such generalization, although he does not make the concept of "jouer à l'être" the guiding idea of his analysis. But at least at one decisive place, he does link it with the general condition of man. The essential contingency of human existence coagulates in the fact that man is and remains his past, and that this past prevents him once and for all from freely creating his being. The past,

*"c'est l'être de fait qui ne peut déterminer le contenu de mes motivations, mais qui les transite de sa contingence parce qu'elles ne peuvent le supprimer ni le changer mais qu'il est au contraire ce qu'elles emportent nécessairement*

<sup>40</sup> Page 98.

avec elles pour le modifier. . . . C'est ce qu'il fait qu'à chaque instant je ne suis pas diplomate et marin, que je suis professeur, quoique je ne puisse que jouer cet être sans pouvoir jamais le rejoindre."<sup>41</sup>

But if man can only play his being, then the freedom of the "Pour-soi" is in reality nothing but his ability to act a prescribed role in a play in which neither his part nor its interpretation is of his own free choosing. The *Cogito's* transcendence, instead of showing forth as the very root of man's power over himself and his world, would appear as the very token of his being-for-others. Moreover, and most important, his liberty would lie, not in the "free" transcendence of the *Cogito* but rather in its negation: in the cancellation of that performance in which he has to play permanently the "Pour-soi" while actually being-for-others. But the negation of the "Pour-soi" is the "En-soi," the negation of the *Cogito* is the state of being a thing, nature. The analysis is thus driven into the sphere of reification: this sphere seems to contain the possibility of a freedom and satisfaction which are quite different from that of the *Cogito* and its activity.

The state of reification as the lever for the liberation of man appears in Sartre's philosophy on two different levels: (1) on the level of the individual existence as the "attitude of (sexual) desire," (2) on the socio-historical level as the revolutionary attitude of the proletariat. Sartre does not establish the link between these two levels: whereas the first is intrinsically connected with the main philosophical argument, the second remains extraneous to it and is developed only outside *L'Être et le Néant*, in the article "Matérialisme et Révolution."

According to Sartre, "le désir" is essentially "le désir sexuel." To him, sexuality is not "un accident contingent lié à notre nature physiologique," but a fundamental structure of the "Pour-soi" in its being-for-others.<sup>42</sup> He had previously described the two chief types of human relations in terms of sexual relations (sadism and masochism); now sexuality becomes the force which cancels the entire apparatus of existentialist freedom, activity, and morality.

"Le désir" becomes this force first by virtue of the fact that it is the negation of all activity, all "performance":

"Le désir n'est pas désir de faire."<sup>43</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Pages 162 f. The past is "the fact which cannot determine the content of my motivations but which passes through them with its contingency because they can neither suppress nor change it. The past is rather that which the motivations necessarily carry with them and modify. . . . This is what causes me, at each instant, *not to be* a diplomat or a sailor, but rather a professor, although I can only play this being without ever being able to rejoin it."

<sup>42</sup> Pages 452 f.

<sup>43</sup> Page 454.

Whatever activity the desire may engender, all "technique amoureuse," accrues to it from outside. The desire itself is "purement et simplement désir d'un objet transcendant," namely, "désir d'un corps." And this object is desired purely and simply as what it is and appears, in its brute "facticité."

In describing the "désir sexuel" and its object, Sartre emphasizes the characteristics which make this relation the very opposite of the "Pour-soi" and its activity:

"... dans le désir sexuel la conscience est comme empatée, il semble qu'on se laisse envahir par la facticité, qu'on cesse de la fuir et qu'on glisse vers un consentement passif au désir."<sup>44</sup>

This is the coming-to-rest of the transcending *Cogito*, the paralysis of its freedom, "projects," and performances. And the same force which cancels the incessant performance of the "Pour-soi" also cancels its alienation. The "désir sexuel" reveals its object as stripped of all the attitudes, gestures, and affiliations which make it a standardized instrument, reveals the "corps comme chair" and thereby "comme révélation fascinante de la facticité."<sup>45</sup> Enslavement and repression are cancelled, not in the sphere of purposeful, "projective" activity, but in the sphere of the "corps vécu comme chair," in the "trâme d'inertie."<sup>46</sup> By the same token, the image of fulfillment and satisfaction is, not in the evertranscending "Pour-soi," but in its own negation, in its pure "être-là," in the fascination of its being an object (for itself and for others). Reification itself thus turns into liberation.

The "désir sexuel" accomplishes this negation of the negation not as a mere relapse into animal nature, but as a free and liberating human relation. In other words, the "désir sexuel" is what it is only as activity of the "Pour-soi," an activity, however, which is rather the negation of all activity and which aims at the liberation of the pure presence of its object. This activity is "la caresse":

"Le désir s'exprime par la caresse comme la pensée par le langage."<sup>47</sup>

The breaking of the reified world, the revelation of the "chair... comme contingence pure de la présence" is only brought about by the "caresse":

<sup>44</sup> Page 457. "... in sexual desire consciousness is as though dulled; one appears to flee oneself be pervaded by the mere facticity (of one's existence as body), to cease fleeing from it, and to glide into a passive ascent to desire."

<sup>45</sup> Page 458. Reveals "the body as flesh," as the "fascinating revelation of facticity."

<sup>46</sup> "the body lived as flesh," in the "web of inertia."

<sup>47</sup> Page 459. "Desire expresses itself through caress as thought does through language."

"La caresse fait naître Autrui comme chair pour moi et pour lui-même."  
 . . . Elle "révèle la chair en déshabillant le corps de son action, en le scindant  
 des possibilités qui l'entourent. . . ."<sup>48</sup>

It is thus in complete isolation from its possibilities, oblivious of its freedom and responsibility, divested of all its performances and achievements, in being a pure "object" ("corps vécu comme chair") that the *Ego* finds itself in the Other. The relationships among men have become relationships among things, but this fact is no longer concealed and distorted by societal fetishes and ideologies. Reification no longer serves to perpetuate exploitation and toil but is in its entirety determined by the "pleasure principle."

Moreover, the fundamental change in the existential structure caused by the "désir sexuel" affects not only the individuals concerned but also their (objective) world. The "désir sexuel" has, according to Sartre, a genuinely cognitive function: it reveals the (objective) world in a new form.

"Si mon corps . . . n'est plus senti comme l'instrument qui ne peut être utilisé par aucun instrument, c'est-à-dire comme l'organisation synthétique de mes actes dans le monde; s'il est vécu comme chair, c'est comme renvoi à ma chair que je saisis les objets du monde. Cela signifie que je me fais passif par rapport à eux. . . . Un contact est *caresse*, c'est-à-dire que ma perception n'est pas utilisation de l'objet et dépassement du présent en vue d'une fin; mais percevoir un objet, dans l'attitude désirante, c'est me caresser à lui."<sup>49</sup>

The "attitude désirante" thus releases the objective world as well as the *Ego* from domination and manipulation, cancels their "instrumentality," and, in doing so, reveals their own pure presence, their "chair."

We have seen that the fixation on the property relation permeates Sartre's entire book: not only the relation between the "Pour-soi" and "En-soi," but also the fundamental relationships between the "Pour-soi" and "L'Autrui," the interhuman relationships are eventually interpreted in terms of "appropriation." Finally, the "désir sexuel" is the attempt to appropriate freely the liberty of the Other. That all these appropriations turn out to be futile and self-defeating only renews and perpetuates the attempt to appropriate. And the one point, the one moment which ap-

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* "Caress causes the Other to be born as flesh for me and for himself. . . . Caress reveals the flesh by divesting the body of its action, by isolating it from the possibilities which surround it. . . ."

<sup>49</sup> Page 461. "If my body . . . is no longer felt to be the instrument which can be used by any other instrument, that is, as the synthetic organization of my acts in the world, if it is lived as flesh, it is then, as reverberation of my flesh, that I seize the objects in the world. This means that I make myself passive in relationship to them. . . . A contact is caress means that my perception is not utilization of an object and not the transcending of the present with a view to a goal. To perceive an object, in the attitude of desire, is to caress myself with it."

appears as fulfillment, possession, is where and when man becomes a thing: body, flesh; and his free activity becomes complete inertia: caressing the body as thing. The *Ego*, thus far separated from the "things" and therefore dominating and exploiting them, now has become a "thing" itself—but the thing, in turn, has been freed to its own pure existence. The Cartesian gap between the two substances is bridged in that both have changed their substantiality. The *Ego* has lost its character of being "Pour-soi," set off from and against everything other-than-the *Ego*, and its objects have assumed a subjectivity of their own. The "attitude désirante" thus reveals (the possibility of) a world in which the individual is in complete harmony with the whole, a world which is at the same time the very negation of that which gave the *Ego* freedom only to enforce its free submission to necessity. With the indication of this form of the "réalité humaine," Existentialism cancels its own fundamental conception.

In the sphere of the individual existence, the cancellation is only a temporary one: the free satisfaction afforded in the "attitude désirante" is bound to end in new frustration. Confined within the circle of sadistic and masochistic relationships, man is driven back into the transcending activity of the "Pour-soi." But the image which has guided Sartre's analysis to seek the reality of freedom in the sphere of reification and alienation also leads him into the socio-historical sphere. He tests his conception in a critical discussion of Historical Materialism.

## IV

In Sartre's interpretation of the socio-historical sphere, the reification of the subject (which, in the private sphere, appeared as the "corps vécu comme chair") manifests itself in the existence of the industrial worker. The modern entrepreneur tends to

"réduire le travailleur à l'état de chose en assimilant ses conduites à des propriétés."<sup>50</sup>

In view of the brute mechanization of the worker and his work, in view of his complete subjugation to the capitalistic machine process, it would be ridiculous to preach him the "internal" liberty which the philosophers have preached throughout the centuries:

"Le révolutionnaire lui-même . . . se défie de la liberté. Et il a raison. Les prophètes n'ont jamais manqué, qui lui ont annoncé qu'il était libre: et c'était chaque fois pour le duper."<sup>51</sup>

<sup>50</sup> *Les Temps Modernes* (July, 1946), p. 15. "reduce the worker to the state of a thing by assimilating his behavior to (that of) properties."

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14. "The revolutionary himself . . . distrusts freedom. And rightly so. There has never been lack of prophets to proclaim to him that he was free, and each time in order to cheat him."

Sartre mentions in this connection the Stoic concept of freedom, Christian liberty, and Bergson's idea of freedom:

“elles revenaient toutes à une certaine liberté intérieure que l'homme pourrait conserver en n'importe qu'elle situation. Cette liberté intérieure est une pure mystification idéaliste. . . .”<sup>52</sup>

It would seem that Sartre's own ontological concept of freedom would well be covered by this verdict of “idealistic mystification,” and *L'Être et le Néant* provides little ground for evading it. Now he recognizes the fact that, in the empirical reality, man's existence is organized in such a way that his freedom is totally “alienated,” and that nothing short of a revolutionary change in the social structure can restore the development of his liberty.<sup>53</sup> If this is true, if, by the organization of society, human freedom can be alienated to such an extent that it all but ceases to exist, then the content of human freedom is determined, not by the structure of the “Pour-soi,” but by the specific historical forces which shape the human society. However, Sartre tries to rescue his idea of freedom from Historical Materialism.<sup>54</sup> He accepts the revolution as the only way to the liberation of mankind, but he insists that the revolutionary solution presupposes man's freedom to *seize* this solution, in other words, that man must be free “*prior*” to his liberation. Sartre maintains that this presupposition destroys the basis of materialism, according to which man is wholly determined by the material world. But according to Historical Materialism, the revolution remains an act of freedom—in spite of all material determination. Historical Materialism has recognized this freedom in the important role of the maturity of the revolutionary consciousness. Marx' constant emphasis on the material determination of the consciousness in all its manifestations points up the relationships between the subject and his world as they actually prevail in the capitalist society, where freedom has shrunk to the possibility of recognizing and seizing the necessity for liberation.

In the concrete historical reality, the freedom of the “Pour-soi,” to whose glorification Sartre devotes his entire book, is thus nothing but one of the preconditions for the possibility of freedom—it is not freedom itself. Moreover, isolated from the specific historical context in which alone the “transcendence” of the subject may become a precondition of freedom, and hypostatized into the ontological form of the subject as such, this

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* “They all come back to a certain internal liberty which man can preserve in any situation whatsoever. This internal liberty is nothing but an idealistic mystification. . . .”

<sup>53</sup> *Les Temps Modernes* (June, 1946), p. 1561.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

transcendental liberty becomes the very token of enslavement. The anti-fascist who is tortured to death may retain his moral and intellectual freedom to "transcend" this situation: he is still tortured to death. Human freedom is the very negation of that transcendental liberty in which Sartre sees its realization. In *L'Être et le Néant*, this negation appeared only in the "attitude désirante": it was the loss of the "Pour-soi," its reification in the "corps vécu comme chair" which suggested a new idea of freedom and happiness.

Similarly, in Sartre's interpretation of the socio-historical sphere, it is the existence, not of the free but of the reified subject which points the way toward real liberation. The wage laborer, whose existence is that of a thing, and whose activity is essentially action on things, conceives of his liberation naturally as a change in the relationship between man and things. Sartre interprets the process between capital and wage labor in terms of the Hegelian process between master and servant. The laborer, who works in the service of the entrepreneur on the means of production, transforms, through his labor, these means into the instruments for his liberation. True, his labor is imposed upon him, and he is deprived of its products, but "within these limitations," his labor confers upon him "la maîtrise sur les choses:"

"Le travailleur se saisit comme possibilité de faire varier à l'infini la forme d'un objet matériel en agissant sur lui selon certaines règles universelles. En d'autres termes, c'est le déterminisme de la matière qui lui offre la première image de sa liberté. . . . Il dépasse son état d'esclave par son action sur les choses et les choses lui renvoient par la rigueur même de leur enchaînement l'image d'une liberté concrète qui est celle de les modifier. Et puisque l'ébauche de sa liberté concrète lui apparaît dans les maillons du déterminisme, il n'est pas étonnant qu'il vise à remplacer la relation d'homme à homme, qui se présente à ses yeux comme celle d'une liberté tyrannique à une obéissance humiliée, par celle d'homme à chose et, finalement, puisque l'homme qui gouverne les choses est chose à son tour, d'un autre point de vue, par celle de chose à chose."<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16. "The worker sees himself as the possibility of modifying endlessly the form of material objects by acting on them in accordance with certain universal rules. In other words, it is the determinateness of matter which offers him the first view of his freedom. . . . He transcends his state of slavery through his action on things, and things give back to him, by the very rigidity of their bondage, the image of a tangible freedom which consists of modifying them. And since the outline of tangible freedom appears to him shackled to determinism, it is not surprising that he visualizes the relationship of man to man, which appears to him as that of tyrannical liberty to humbled obedience, replaced by a relationship of man to thing, and finally, since, from another point of view, the man who controls things is in turn a thing himself, by the relationship of thing to thing."

Sartre maintains that the materialistic conception of freedom is itself the victim of reification in so far as it conceives the liberated world in terms of a new relationship among things, a new organization of things. As the liberation originates in the process of labor, it remains defined by this process, and the liberated society appears only as "une entreprise harmonieuse d'exploitation du monde."<sup>66</sup> The result would simply be "a more rational organization of society"<sup>67</sup>—not the realization of human freedom and happiness.

This critique is still under the influence of "idealistic mystifications." The "more rational organization of society," which Sartre belittles as "simplement," is the very precondition of freedom. It means the abolition of exploitation and repression in all their forms. And since exploitation and repression are rooted in the material structure of society, their abolition requires a change in this structure: a more rational organization of the relationships of production. In Historical Materialism, this organization of the liberated society is so little "defined by labor" ("définie par le travail") that Marx once formulated the Communist goal as the "abolition of labor," and the shortening of the working day as the precondition for the establishment of the "realm of freedom." The formula conveys the image of the unfettered satisfaction of the human faculties and desires, thus suggesting the essential identity of freedom and happiness which is at the core of materialism.

Sartre notes that throughout history, materialism was linked with a revolutionary attitude:

"Si loin que je remonte, je la (la foi matérialiste) trouve liée à l'attitude révolutionnaire."<sup>68</sup>

Indeed, the materialist faith was revolutionary in so far as it was materialistic, that is to say, as it shifted the definition of human freedom from the sphere of consciousness to that of material satisfaction, from toil to enjoyment, from the moral to the pleasure principle. The idealistic philosophy has made freedom into something frightening and tyrannic, bound up with repression, resignation, scarcity, and frustration. Behind the idealistic concept of freedom lurked the demand for an incessant moral and practical performance, an enterprise the profits of which were to be invested ever again in the same activity—an activity which was really rewarding only for a very small part of the population. The materialistic conception of freedom implies the discontinuation of this activity and performance: it

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* (June, 1946), p. 1561. "No matter how far back I go, I find it (materialistic faith) linked with the revolutionary attitude."

makes the reality of freedom a pleasure. Prior to the achievement of this "utopian" goal, materialism teaches man the necessities which determine his life in order to break them by his liberation. And his liberation is nothing less than the abolition of repression.

Sartre hits upon the revolutionary function of the materialistic principle in his interpretation of the "attitude désirante": there, and only there, is his concept of freedom identical with the abolition of repression. But the tendencies which make for the destruction of his idealistic conception remain confined within the framework of philosophy and do not lead to the destruction of the ideology itself. Consequently, in Sartre's work, they manifest themselves only as a disintegration of the traditional philosophical "style." This disintegration is expressed in his rejection of the "esprit de sérieux" (seriousness).

v

According to Sartre, the "esprit de sérieux" must be banned from philosophy because, by taking the "réalité humaine" as a totality of objective relationships, to be understood and evaluated in terms of objective standards, the "esprit de sérieux" offends against the free play of subjective forces which is the very essence of the *réalité humaine*. By its very "style" philosophy thus fails to gain the adequate approach to its subject. In contrast, the existentialist style is designed to assert, already through the mode of presentation, the absolutely free movement of the *Cogito*, the "Pour-soi," the creative subject. Its "jouir à l'être" is to be reproduced by the philosophical style. Existentialism plays with every affirmation until it shows forth as negation, qualifies every statement until it turns into its opposite, extends every position to absurdity, makes liberty into compulsion and compulsion into liberty, choice into necessity and necessity into choice, passes from philosophy to *Belles Lettres* and vice versa, mixes ontology and sexology, etc. The heavy seriousness of Hegel and Heidegger is translated into artistic play. The ontological analysis includes a series of "scènes amoureuses," and the novel sets forth philosophical theses in italics.<sup>59</sup>

This disintegration of the philosophical style reflects the inner contradictions of all existential philosophy: the concrete human existence cannot be understood in terms of philosophy. The contradiction derives from the historical conditions under which Western philosophy has developed and to which it remained committed throughout its development. The separation of the intellectual from the material production, of leisure and the leisure class from the underlying population, of theory from practice

<sup>59</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Sang des Autres*.

caused a fundamental gap between the terms of philosophy and the terms of existence. When Aristotle insisted that philosophy presupposed the establishment of the arts directed to the necessities of life, he defined not only the situation of the philosopher but of philosophy itself. The content of the basic philosophical concepts implies a degree of freedom from the necessities of life which is enjoyed only by a small number of men. The general concepts which aim at the structures and forms of being transcend the realm of necessity and the life of those who are confined to this realm. Their existence is not on the philosophical level. Conversely, philosophy does not possess the conceptual instruments for comprehending their existence, which is the concreteness of the "réalité humaine." The concepts which do adequately describe this concreteness are not the exemplifications and particularizations of any philosophical concept. The existence of a slave or of a factory worker or of a salesclerk is not an "example" of the concept of being or freedom or life or man. The latter concepts may well be "applicable" to such forms of existence and "cover" them by their scope, but this coverage refers only to an irrelevant part or aspect of the reality. The philosophical concepts abstract necessarily from the concrete existence, and they abstract from its very content and essence; their generality transcends the existence *qualitatively*, into a different *genus*. Man as such, as "kind" is the genuine theme of philosophy; his *hic et nunc* is the *ὑλη* (matter, stuff) which remains outside the realm of philosophy. Aristotle's dictum that man is an ultimate indivisible kind (*ἔσχατον ἄτομον; ἄτομον εἶδος; ἄτομον τῷ σένει*), which defies further concretization pronounces the inner impossibility of all existential philosophy.

Against its intentions and efforts, Existentialism demonstrates the truth of Aristotle's statement. We have seen how, in Sartre's philosophy, the concept of the "Pour-soi" vascillates between that of the individual subject and that of the universal *Ego* or consciousness. Most of the essential qualities which he attributes to the "Pour-soi" are qualities of man as a *genus*. As such, they are *not* the essential qualities of man's concrete existence. Sartre makes reference to Marx' early writings, but not to Marx' statement that man, in his concrete historical existence, is not (yet) the realization of the *genus* man. This proposition states the fact that the historical forms of society have crippled the development of the general human faculties, of the *humanitas*. The concept of the *genus* man is thus at the same time the concept of the abstract-universal and of the *ideal* man—but is *not* the concept of the "réalité humaine."

But if the "réalité humaine" is not the concretization of the *genus* man, it is equally indescribable in terms of the individual. For the same historical conditions which crippled the realization of the *genus* man also crippled the

realization of his individuality. The activities, attitudes, and efforts which circumscribe his concrete existence are, in the last analysis, not his but those of his class, profession, position, society. In this sense is the life of the individual indeed the life of the universal, but this universal is a configuration of specific historical forces, made up by the various groups, interests, institutions, etc., which form the social reality. The concepts which actually reach the concrete existence must therefore derive from a theory of society. Hegel's philosophy comes so close to the structure of the concrete existence because he interprets it in terms of the historical universal, but because he sees in this universal only the manifestation of the Idea he remains within the realm of philosophical abstraction. One step more toward concretization would have meant a transgression beyond philosophy itself.

Such transgression occurred in the opposition to Hegel's philosophy. Kierkegaard and Marx are frequently claimed as the origins of existential philosophy. But neither Kierkegaard nor Marx wrote existential philosophy. When they came to grips with the concrete existence, they abandoned and repudiated philosophy. Kierkegaard comes to the conclusion that the situation of man can be comprehended and "solved" only by theology and religion. For Marx, the conception of the "réalité humaine" is the critique of political economy and the theory of the socialist revolution. The opposition against Hegel pronounces the essential inadequacy of philosophy in the face of the concrete human existence.

Since then, the gap between the terms of philosophy and those of existence has widened. The experience of the totalitarian organization of the human existence forbids to conceive freedom in any other form than that of a free society. No philosophy can possibly comprehend the prevailing concreteness. Heidegger's existential ontology remains intentionally "transcendental": his category of *Dasein* is neutral toward all concretization. Nor does he attempt to elaborate *Weltanschauung* and ethics. In contrast, Sartre attempts such concretization with the methods and terms of philosophy—and the concrete existence remains "outside" the philosophical conception, as a mere example or illustration. His political radicalism lies outside his philosophy, extraneous to its essence and content. Concreteness and radicalism characterize the style of his work rather than its content. And this may be part of the secret of its success. He presents the old ideology in the new cloak of radicalism and rebellion. Conversely, he makes destruction and frustration, sadism and masochism, sensuality and politics into ontological conditions. He exposes the danger zones of society, but transforms them into structures of Being. His philosophy is less the expression of defiance and revolt than of a morality which teaches

men to abandon all utopian dreams and efforts and to arrange themselves on the firm ground of reality: Existentialism

“dispose les gens à comprendre que seule compte la réalité, que les rêves, les attentes, les espoirs permettent seulement de définir un homme comme rêve déçu, comme espoirs avortées, comme attentes inutiles. . . .”<sup>60</sup>

Existentialism has indeed a strong undertone of positivism: the reality has the last word.

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