CHAPTER IX

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF EXISTENTIALISM

In earlier chapters, I have on several occasions made a distinction between the substantive theses that are defended by the existentialists with respect to the nature of value and freedom, and the wider influence and significance that are often claimed for existentialism as a philosophical movement. I have also pointed out that my interpretation of existentialism as a movement of reaction against certain long-standing tendencies within the Western philosophical tradition raises serious questions about the appropriateness of the considerable popular response to existentialism. This response cannot, after all, have been inspired by a sense of liberation from the chains of a Platonic intellectualism that is in fact almost completely unfamiliar to the great mass of those who are drawn to existentialism in some of its more accessible forms. As I have noted, one might, in these circumstances, be tempted to conclude that the whole popular excitement over existentialism rests on an elaborate misunderstanding. On the other hand, if it could be shown that there is an affinity or parallelism between the developments within the history of moral philosophy which I have tried to outline and wider movements of Western life and culture, then it might become possible to interpret the reception accorded to existential philosophy—discounting certain purely eccentric manifestations—in such a way as to make it genuinely relevant to the actual content of existentialist doctrine. In this final chapter, I propose to argue that a parallelism of this kind does exist, and that in spite of its profound involvement with a somewhat arcane philosophical tradition, existentialism may appropriately be regarded as the philosophical expres-
sion of a movement within Western—and perhaps world—
culture, the importance and scope of which can hardly be exag-
gerated.

This way of posing the question of the wider significance of ex-
istentialism assumes that philosophy in general, and ethical
theory in particular, develop in substantial independence from
other movements in the societies that cultivate them; and that a
special explanation is therefore in order when major interest in
some philosophical doctrine is shown by the general educated
public. Those who, like the Marxists, reject this assumption and
treat philosophical doctrines as coded expressions of the situation
and prospects of some society or social class at a certain stage in
its historical development will naturally approach the whole
question I am raising here in a quite different way. Marxists have
in fact characterized existentialism, in both its philosophical and
popular forms, as a philosophy whose clientele is the Western en-
trepreneurial bourgeoisie. What is said to be the desperate sense
of isolation of that group from the forward movement of history
allegedly finds its counterpart in the extreme moral individual-
ism of the existentialists. While many interpreters of existential-
ism have been content to attribute its special ethos to particular
crises in the life of countries like Germany after World War I
and France during and after World War II, and have thus failed
to provide any intelligible account of the strong elements of con-
tinuity with earlier phases of Western moral philosophy that ex-
istentialism reveals, there have been Marxists like G. Lukacs who
recognize these historical affinities and are prepared to convict
virtually the whole post-Kantian tradition of proto-Fascism.1 The
grotesque distortions of history to which this line of interpreta-
tion has led cannot be dealt with here. Instead, by giving a brief
account of the extra-philosophical movements with which the
gradual emergence of voluntaristic ethical theory does run paral-
lel, I hope to show that any characterization of that evolution in
purely political or economic terms misses its deepest significance.

1 The high-water mark of Marxist denigration in this field was set by
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I.

While there are great and obvious difficulties in the way of any attempt to chart the evolution of the sense of selfhood within a society or a culture, it is impossible not to feel that a profound and accelerating change has been taking place over a period of several centuries in the way human beings conceive their powers and responsibilities as moral agents. For a very long time—indeed, for the vast majority of us, until quite recently—the circumstances of life of almost all human beings have been so necessitous and so restricting as to make it virtually impossible for them to think of themselves as exercising effective control over any significant aspect of their lives. Under conditions of enforced passivity, or rather, of activity exclusively within the limits of certain pre-established social roles, it was inevitable that such ideas as were formed of moral personality should have had a strongly "naturalistic" cast. When one's mode of life and social role are not susceptible of any significant modification, a clear-cut distinction between one's nature as a human being and one's "station and duties" will not be easy to make. As a result, what one "ought" to do will quite naturally come to be thought of as something very like self-evident truth, capable of being "read off" from the social world we inhabit. It seems plausible, moreover, to suggest that intellectualism and its cognate ethical theories build upon (and owe a large measure of their plausibility to) such a mode of life in which the possibilities of significant choice are so radically curtailed as to find only a subordinate place in the picture human beings form of themselves as moral beings.2

Now it is this state of affairs in which human beings are born into a world of wholly determinate social roles and relationships that has been gradually changing. At first, during earlier centuries of the modern era, and indeed up to the nineteenth century,

2 This view seems to have the support of S. de Beauvoir, when she says that "moins les circonstances économiques et sociales permettent à un individu d'agir sur le monde, plus ce monde lui apparaît comme donné." (Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté, p. 68.)
an enlargement of the possibilities of life was realized for only a
tiny and privileged fraction of the total population. More re-
cently, larger and larger segments of the population of Western
countries and significant minorities within the non-Western world
have been drawn into this movement. What is of special interest
in that evolution from the standpoint of this study is not so much
the immense and fateful transformation of the material instru-
mentailties of human life, but rather the progressive internaliza-
tion and, as it might be called, “voluntarization” of much that
was previously accepted and espoused without question and in-
deed without any sense that an individual commitment might be
involved. As the objective possibilities of freely fashioning one’s
own life have increased, ideas of self-determination and of the ne-
cessity for a personal ratification by each individual of the mode
of life proposed to him by his society have come to occupy a
larger and larger place in the conception we form of ourselves.³
To a considerable extent, of course, this sense of a personal par-
ticipation in the creation of the self attaches to relatively superfi-
cial details of personal style and manner, but it has also pen-
etrated to the deeper levels of selfhood and to basic ideals of life
and modes of relationship with other human beings. At all levels,
this new and essentially critical form of self-consciousness reduces
the claims of custom and authority to set the course of an individ-
ual life to so many données, all equally subject to the judgment
and decision of the individual moral consciousness.

It would not, I think, be an exaggeration to say that for the
first time in human history large numbers of human beings have
come to think of themselves as autonomous moral agents, capable
of raising and resolving for themselves all questions about what
they are to do. Here, then, is a real analogue to the drama of tran-
sition from a pre- or quasi-moral condition to a full assumption
of responsibility for one’s own life that is celebrated by the exis-
tentialists. No doubt we were moral beings all along in the sense

³ For an excellent interpretation of the theme of autonomy in nineteenth
century history, see F. Schnabel, Deutsche Geschichte im neunzehnten Jahr-
hundert, (Freiburg: Herder and Co., 1929). Vol. 1. Many interesting com-
ments on the “culture of the will” can be found in the critical essays of Lionel
Trilling. See The Liberal Imagination (New York: Doubleday, 1950), and
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of having a capacity for choice, and of exercising it within the narrow limits set by the technological and institutional frameworks of earlier societies; but it is also true that in a special sense we make ourselves moral beings by adopting a certain perspective on our lives and on those of others. Because the existentialists concentrate their attention not so much on the finer internal substructures of a fully moralized human life as on the contrast between being a fully self-conscious moral agent and the condition of life in which free moral personality is either not recognized or is suppressed, they speak with special directness to the highly focused and explicit kind of moral consciousness that has emerged in its distinctive form in the course of modern Western history and is still new enough not to be disposed to take itself for granted. In spite of passing fads and excesses of one kind or another, the recognition given to existentialism as well as to its forerunners in the history of ethical theory may accordingly be regarded as reflecting an authentic affinity between its main theses and the movement toward personal autonomy that is perhaps the distinguishing feature of modern Western culture.

Nothing testifies more convincingly to the existence of this affinity than do the distinctive preoccupations of much of the imaginative literature of twentieth-century Europe. I have in mind not so much the “literature of existentialism” (i.e., the novels and plays that are either written by existentialist philosophers themselves, or directly inspired by their writings), but instead, certain works that have evidently taken form in virtually complete independence of any direct philosophical influence and therefore constitute evidence of a particularly valuable kind bearing on the moral atmosphere of the time. The common theme of these works, as of much of modern literature, is the situation of human beings who have lost contact with or repudiated the social institutions and the related systems of belief that claim to provide authoritative moral guidance to the individual, and who accordingly live in what must be—from the standpoint of their previous experience—a peculiarly truncated moral world. Their situation is that now frequently described as “alienated.” This somewhat

4 I have in mind here writers as different as André Malraux and R. M. Rilke, Samuel Beckett and Paul Valéry.
too glibly employed term is unobjectionable if it is simply meant to characterize a state in which an individual is thrown back on his own moral resources as a result of being no longer willing or able to accept the claims to unconditional validity of some externally imposed code. In any case, among the works of imaginative literature that seek to render this situation, there are those that can only be called testaments of despair, and others that seek with very different degrees of success to project an affirmative ideal of what human life can be under this new dispensation. Perhaps only in the work of Franz Kafka are the stark lineaments of this truly modern situation rendered without artificial despair or enthusiasm, and above all without any tincture of ideological partisanship. The extraordinary power and directness with which Kafka's fables speak to the modern imagination make it very difficult to believe that they do not express something in our sense of life that goes much deeper than any literary fad.

I do not wish to be misunderstood as suggesting that this special affinity that existentialism has with the modern spirit is so close as to preclude the possibility that the latter might find expression in any other conception of the moral life. There is, after all (as I have noted), a variant concept of autonomy that associates it with the existence of objective norms, and attributes to each human being the capacity and the right to interpret and apply these norms for himself. Moreover, as a matter of historical fact, the movement toward a liberalization of the conditions of social life has typically based itself on such intellectualistic conceptions of autonomy rather than on a radical voluntarism of the existentialist type. Nevertheless, while conceding all this, one may still wonder whether such ostensibly intellectualistic defenses of liberalism are not more deeply tinged with voluntarism than their leading proponents have often grasped. Not only does the assignment of a right to each human being to interpret moral laws for himself suggest a measure of scepticism with respect to the patency of these laws; but it is also not clear how in practice a

5 I have developed this view of Kafka's work at greater length in my article, "Kafka and the Primacy of the Ethical," *Hudson Review*, Vol. 13 (1960), pp. 60–73.
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right to interpret would be distinguished from a right to choose one's principles of action. Once people come to think of themselves as having to "decide" questions of interpretation at all levels of the moral life, the intellectualistic compulsion to duplicate each such decision in the form of a corresponding determination of an objective moral principle and thus to project it into some antecedent realm of truth seems likely to lose much of its power. If that is so, the final destination of all ideologies of self-determination and moral freedom may be expected to approximate to a position very like that which the existentialists now represent.

II

Throughout the period during which these changes have been taking place, there has been an accompanying current of speculation about the effects that might be expected to follow upon a widespread acceptance of a voluntaristic and individualistic conception of morality. Since the middle of the last century, this speculation has reached flood proportions and it has ranged from expressions of exalted enthusiasm over the prospect before us to warnings of the dangerous implications of moral freedom. In the latter category, writers from Dostoevsky onward have laid great emphasis on what they take to be the demoniacal character of an unqualified moral freedom, and have argued that the only logical issue for such a freedom must be a violent act of destruction directed against the values of the established social order and ultimately against the self, i.e., suicide. The assumption shared by writers who take this view is that the freedom they condemn is of such a nature as to be incapable of finding expression through the acceptance or creation of any stable moral relationships to other human beings, and therefore must assume the form of a violent repudiation of previously accepted values for which there is no longer felt to be any adequate foundation. Such views as these appear to be rather widely accepted, and have certainly influenced the reception accorded to existentialism in many quar-
ters. They are also exploited by certain versions of religious "existentialism" which expose their adherents to the icy drafts of non-being just long enough for them to become thoroughly chilled and correspondingly amenable to being led back into what is, in spite of certain renovations suited to the contemporary taste, still recognizably a religio-moral edifice in the old style.\textsuperscript{6}

There are, I think, good reasons for believing that this "Dostoevskian" view of the implications of moral autonomy is mistaken. At the same time, however, it is important to understand that it owes such plausibility as it possesses to an experience of disorientation and shock that often does accompany a shift from one general conception of morality to another like that of existentialism. This disarray reflects a belief that no distinction is any longer possible between purely individual preferences and generally valid moral principles. The source of this belief may be found in a feeling that while existentialism may not prejudice \textit{what} we can say in a normative way, it often seems to leave us without a means of saying it. It rules out any use of the factual model for interpreting moral truth, and yet provides no new means by which we can express an order of values that is not finally arbitrary. The result is that moral judgments as a class are pushed into a limbo in which no general rational principles operate at all. The impulse to claim general authority for certain principles still survives, but it is saddled with an ethical vocabulary that cannot give a meaning to this conception. I am forced to see that my favored moral judgments and their opposites are profoundly alike in being nonlogical acts of preference, but I am unable to point to anything that substantiates my sense of the unique status enjoyed by my principle, beyond the very fact that it is mine, and that can hardly serve as a basis for any kind of su-

\textsuperscript{6} Sartre has explicitly declared that "l'apparition, dans l'entre-deux-guerres, d'un existentialisme allemand correspond certainement—au moins chez Jaspers—à une sournoise volonté de ressusciter le transcendant." (\textit{Critique de la raison dialectique}, p. 21). Sartre declines to discuss the case of Heidegger in this connection on the ground that it is too complex. In Heidegger's writings since the war, however, with their suggestions that man must listen for the "call of being," there are unmistakable signs of such a return to a more traditional conception of being as a source of a message that has relevance to human concerns. See Heidegger, \textit{Über den Humanismus} (Frankfort: V. Klostermann, 1949), pp. 28–29.
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propersonal authority. To the extent that I do not merely identify with my own preferences, but try to accept a moral principle only when the grounds for its acceptance are such as to be equally compelling for everyone, I am searching for a standard that is not itself internal to one of the two conflicting views. At this final level of the moral life, however, there is none to be found; and the realization that there is no possibility of an extrinsic justification for the moral life can lead to doubts as to whether, under these new auspices, that life is possible at all.

Nevertheless, however painful we may find this dislocation of the moral life that is produced by the apparent absence of any model for the expression of an ordering of values that is not purely individual, it will very likely be temporary and may yield in time to a saner appreciation of the possibilities that are still left open by a morality of freedom. I have already tried to show that there are such possibilities, and that among them is a type of human relationship characterized by effectively binding obligations. Instead of investigating these possibilities that are left open by an acceptance of a morality of freedom the Dostoevskian critic proceeds to read the psychological reactions noted above and the destructive forms of conduct in which they sometimes find expression back into the very doctrine of moral autonomy itself of which they are then declared to be the necessary logical issue. This is a plainly inadmissible procedure. What those who employ it forget is that if the world does not have a “meaning” in the required sense of generating absolute moral directives, then neither does this fact about the world—that it does not provide absolute norms—have the power to do so. No policy of action is justified

7 This seems to me to be what Sartre is saying when he speaks of the discovery that “toutes les activités humaines sont équivalentes” (L’Être et le néant, p. 721).

8 One could wish that Albert Camus had grasped this point more dearly. In his Le Mythe de Sisyphe (Paris: Gallimard, 1942), he appears to argue that the very pointlessness of human effort is to be espoused as the one value that survives the wreck of all the rest. This is in effect to substitute a penchant for action for action’s sake for all the ordinary reasons we have for acting in one way rather than another, and from such a view it is just a step to an identification of true autonomy with the life-style of the hero and the “adventurer” and the ethos of the acte gratuit, which Sartre has rightly declared to be something very different from authenticity. See my review of Camus’ book, Philosophical Review, Vol. 66 (1957), pp. 104–07.
by the fact that its opposite—in this case, the traditional moral norms that the nihilist violates—is not somehow endorsed by the universe. It is, of course, possible that a perception of the fraudulence of an endorsement of this type which we had previously taken at face value may have the paradoxical effect of making a violation of the norm so endorsed seem attractive. There is no reason, however, to think that this type of reaction would be very widespread; and where it occurs it would seem more likely to be motivated by the oppressive rigidity of the moral discipline that has been cast off than by anything inherent in the experience of moral autonomy as such.

We should not, however, jump to the conclusion that, because there is no valid basis for the prophecies of calamity we have been reviewing, we should look forward to a general acceptance of an autonomist ethic with unreserved enthusiasm. There are, in fact, certain drawbacks connected with the use of the concept of autonomy: first, as an instrument for describing the moral reality of the world we actually live in; second, as representing an ideal which we should seek to realize ever more fully in our own lives and in those of others. To these I now turn.

III

The difficulties connected with the use of the concept of autonomy as an instrument of description has already been touched on in the course of an earlier discussion of the divergent interpretations of moral freedom put forward by Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. The point was made that there are real and important differences among human beings with respect to their degree of internalization and explicit assumption of the policies implicit in their modes of conduct. While all human beings may very well possess the capacity to transform automatic and customary behavior into fully intentional "action," there is no reason to think that it is equally easy for all of them to do so; and it is manifest that they in fact bring areas of greatly varying extent within their lives under explicit decisional control. If under these

9 See ch. 7, pp. 158 ff.
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circumstances we nevertheless proceed to give an account of our own moral experience and that of other persons in which we make use of a set of concepts that at least suggest that an exhaustive "voluntarization" of our experience has already taken place, a very peculiar picture of the actual moral world will result. Specifically, all distinctions of degree and quality with respect to the responsibility individuals bear for their actions will be erased when the latter are portrayed as endowed with a full awareness of the whole range of options that confronts them.

Nowhere does the danger inherent in this procedure emerge more clearly than in Sartre's critical essays, especially in his "existential psychoanalyses" of Baudelaire and Jean Genêt, but also with certain differences in his treatment of anti-Semitism. In these often very brilliant and perceptive studies, Sartre applies his general doctrine that the function of a properly conceived psychoanalysis is to disengage from our actions the total choice of ourselves which we in fact have made and for which we alone are responsible. This conception of psychoanalysis is contrasted with the Freudian position, which, according to Sartre, seeks the sense of our actions in an "unconscious" which is disjoined from the ego and its choices and for the content of which we—our conscious selves—bear no responsibility. To the degree that this proposed revision of psychoanalytic theory corrects a tendency to transform the unconscious into an inaccessible and mysterious entity, it can have a very beneficial effect; but questions begin to arise when Sartre proceeds to impute the total life-policy he infers on the basis of a scattering of biographical data to the subject of the investigation as his choice of himself. The difficulty here stems not so much from the fact that the events of a man's life may admit of several interpretations and that Sartre often does not seem to recognize the inherent ambiguity of the evidence


11 A quite different and, I think, more accurate interpretation of Freud's doctrines in their bearing on morality can be found in P. Rieff, Freud: The Mind of the Moralist (New York: Viking Press, 1959). In certain respects the "ethic of honesty" which Rieff attributes to Freud is not so very different from Sartre's own position, although the affinity is much closer in the case of Merleau-Ponty.
with which he has to deal, but rather from Sartre's failure to make any allowance for the inevitable discrepancies between his own perspective on the system of choices that is an individual human being, and the often much more limited perspective of that individual himself. Even if we do not challenge the accuracy of any of the assumptions of fact that underly Sartre's interpretation of a given individual's life, and concede a real plausibility to his version of the latter's total choice of himself, it still remains to be determined whether that individual ever entertained a comparable vision of himself and his life and, if so, with what degree of clarity and explicitness and completeness. This is to say that in some sense an individual must be able to recognize himself in the account the existential psychoanalyst gives of his life. While we may be prepared to impute to a person some intentions and some choices that he is unwilling to recognize as his own by appealing to notions like Sartre's "bad faith," there must be real limits in the form of empirical controls of some kind on the use that can be made of such arguments if they are not to turn into devices for establishing any hypothesis about another person's intentions which it may please us to advance. In Sartre's analyses, there is often a kind of non-stop escalation from a not very large evidential base to highly abstract formulations of the total choice through which these data are to receive a meaning. Little or no attention is paid to any evidence bearing on the relationship between the subject's perspective on his own life—the sense the recorded events had for him—and the analyst's perspective on that life. If these differ in ways that cannot be accounted for by ad hoc hypotheses of bad faith, and if (as seems likely), the subject's picture of his own moral history is a much more blurred and ambiguous one in which alternatives and consequences are not laid out with anything like the clarity characteristic of the analyst's presentation, then to substitute the explicitness and completeness of the latter for the opacity and particularity of the former will inevitably introduce serious distortions into our understanding of the life under consideration.

The criticism I am suggesting can be expressed in the following way. It has already been shown that Sartre, like most existentialists, adheres to the doctrine of ontological individualism ac-
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cording to which all actions are the actions of some individual human being, and the rationale of all actions must be in some sense an internal structure of that individual's life. One major implication of this doctrine is that all the accounts and explanations that historians and social scientists give of apparently collective actions must decompose the latter into an indefinitely large number of individual acts with their convergent (or divergent) rationales. Except perhaps in the case of groups bound together by explicitly acknowledged quasi-legal relationships, the practical difficulty of performing such an analysis would be formidable and very likely insuperable; but quite apart from such difficulties, an even more serious issue arises at the level of theory. If, as is so often the case, the individuals participating in such collective movements have very imperfectly and partially internalized the rationale of the action imputed to them, may not any advantage gained by substituting individualistic for holistic concepts in the explanation of such actions be balanced by a corresponding distortion, through overexplicitness, of the actions of the individual participants? In any case, a great deal of our linguistic apparatus for the description and explanation of action seems to be designed so as to permit us to talk about collective actions without the kind of imputation of conscious intention on the part of individual persons on which the existentialist appears to insist. This holistic idiom in which much of our discourse about history and society is carried on has on occasion played into the hands of those who believe that there is a genuinely supraindividual kind of agency, but that fact by itself does not seem to be a sufficient justification for refusing to recognize the ambiguous and indeterminate character of the relationship of individuals to collective actions which makes an intermediate mode of describing such actions a practical necessity.

The second major criticism of existentialism which I wish to suggest is one which, like the first, concerns a possible failure to appreciate the limits that in practice must be observed in seeking to achieve an ideal—that of self-conscious moral freedom—which

in itself is perfectly valid. Specifically, it needs to be understood that by assigning an unqualified priority to the special kind of freedom and self-awareness that the existentialist prizes so highly, we may be led to sacrifice other elements of moral personality. Is it not likely that a conception of the self that is centered on its capacity for explicit volitional self-determination and that proclaims the desirability of an intensification and extension to all areas of life of a highly developed sense of the alternative possibilities of action and of the necessity for choice will tend to interfere with a certain spontaneity and naturalness in our relations to others and to ourselves? To be sure, Sartre has declared that choice may equally well occur not just after conscious deliberation but also when we act passionately and on the spur of the moment. In this way, he may seem to have forestalled an interpretation of his views as encouraging a hypertrophy of the volitional life. Nevertheless, it is hard to resist the conclusion that the effect of a conscious and principled espousal of the ideal of authenticity might be just that; and if so, there are good grounds for fearing that the strenuous culture of the moral will thus initiated might not be an unambiguously desirable goal.

The fact is that there are a good many important aspects of human life to which the notions of choice and decision apply only in a rather strained sense. It is by no means clear, for example, that one can choose to love or to trust another human being. It is certainly possible to choose not to perform the actions that are the natural expression of such attitudes; and it is even possible to perform or to try to perform those actions even in the absence of the real feelings with which the latter are normally associated. It seems very likely however that any attempt to substitute a kind of volitional fiat for these feeling-states or, worse still, to transform the latter into volitional acts would produce at best a very unstable and imperfect facsimile of the "real thing." This point, in turn, may be developed in such a way as to suggest a

13 In formulating this criticism of existentialism, I have benefited from a study of the work of Erik Erikson, especially his *Childhood and Society* (2d ed.; New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1963), and *Insight and Responsibility* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1964).
wider dependence of our systems of choices on the affective dispositions by which they are accompanied. While no set of facts about what we like and dislike can by itself settle any question about what we will do or ought to do, it does seem to be true that an effort of self-definition that is not based on a certain measure of self-knowledge and a recognition of one's own proclivities and interests is unlikely to develop much momentum. There is a sense in which all of us may be said to learn what our long-run preferences really are and what kinds of lives we are effectively willing and able to lead over the long pull. This is the kind of knowledge of ourselves that other persons with longer and wider experience of the world can often help us to acquire. While we are often and no doubt rightly unwilling to accept such counsel, it would be folly to deny that there are any such “facts” about ourselves that need to be taken into account. Sometimes the existentialists seem to have come close to making such a denial, as for example when they insist that all such predisposing affective states themselves express some deeper choice that we ourselves have made. As I have already suggested, there is no obstacle of principle to a broadening of the existentialist concept of a “situation” to include psychological factors, both those that are common to all or most human beings and those that may be idiosyncratic, in such a way as to do justice to the affective dimensions of selfhood while still reserving a central place for the act of critical appraisal and choice. It is clear that in the absence of such a recognition of the special importance of these affective states, a purely volitional ethic that isolates action and choice from the underlying powers and interests of the psychological self might prove a brittle and impermanent guide to life.

This sense that volitional activity emerges from and is sustained by the very aspects of human personality that it is called upon to criticize and perhaps to redirect, has so often been associated with a failure to do anything like justice to the special function of the moral will, and the special kind of independence in which that function is performed that even a reference to it may be misunderstood as an abandonment of the whole notion of autonomy. Such is not my intent here; and the positive thesis for
which I am arguing is one that is perfectly consistent with the central doctrines outlined in earlier chapters. This conception of the place of the moral will within human personality as a whole may be conveyed by means of a somewhat hackneyed simile to which I would append just one further detail. If we compare human personality to an iceberg, then the relatively small exposed portion could be regarded as corresponding to that portion of our lives that is subject to the scrutiny of the moral will. The much larger submerged portion of the iceberg would represent the habitual and quasi-automatic—although by no means necessarily "unconscious"—routines of human life insofar as these are not made the theme of moral interrogation. The innovation I propose is simply that this iceberg should be thought of as one that can be turned over in any direction so that there is no portion of it that cannot be exposed. In terms of this image, then, the point I have been trying to make about the dependence and the independence of moral choice would simply be that the iceberg cannot be completely exposed at any one time and that a particular portion of it can be exposed only if other portions are submerged. Literally, this amounts to saying that while none of the multiple relationships we continuously sustain to the whole of our human environment is immune to becoming the object of critical attention and revisionary choice, it is not possible for all such relationships to be subject to such a review simultaneously or continuously without grave consequences for the integrity of the very moral life they compose. In fact it is tempting to go somewhat further and to suggest that successful critical revision of certain elements in our moral experience can occur only to the extent that others remain undisturbed. To the extent that some existentialist writers may have tended to suggest that the strength that accrues to human beings from the undisturbed operation of such settled dispositions is to be replaced by a conscious and total and continuous act of explicit self-creation, they have not only very greatly exaggerated the powers of critical self-objectification that human beings possess but have also run the danger of mutilating human nature as a whole in the interest of one—albeit a central one—of its faculties.
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IV

Serious as these reservations and criticisms which I have just been formulating certainly are, they clearly call for a more careful effort to set the theses of existentialism in the context of other valid perspectives on the human fact, and not for a simple abandonment of the former. There is, however, another line of criticism which needs to be taken into account if the long-run interest of what the existentialists have to say is to be justly assessed. The criticism I have in mind would take the form of an initial recognition that during a period of transition from one "form of life" to another such as I have attempted to describe, a philosophy such as existentialism might legitimately claim a certain pertinence and interest. It would then go on to question whether that interest could survive the disappearance of the mode of life and of social relationships that gave real point to the existentialist's denials, by providing him with something to reject. When everyone has come to think of himself as an autonomous moral being and the choice-character of all moral principles has been universally acknowledged, will not the reiteration of the corresponding existentialist theses come to seem truistic and even vacuous in the absence of any living sense of morality's possibly being anything other than what it is universally understood to be? Just as communism is sometimes described as an ideology that has a point and a function only during a difficult period of transition from preindustrial to industrial society, may not existentialism and all the other versions of post-Renaissance Western individualism be by-products of a transition from one sense of moral selfhood to another and may they not come to seem extravagant and even in certain respects unintelligible in a society that has completed this transition?

In spite of the surface reasonableness and plausibility of this argument, it is, I think, mistaken, and that for reasons on which I have not touched before but which go a long way toward explaining the contemporary appeal of existentialism. The fact is, that especially in some of its more popular formulations, existential-
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ism is at least as much a protest against certain trends within the urban and industrial society of the present day as it is a repudiation of the closed, morally determinate society of the past. As so many commentators on the current cultural scene have made clear, there is a very real question about the place that the ideal of personal autonomy can claim in the emerging society of the future. It may be that the very technological and scientific progress that has so immensely expanded the possibilities of human life will impose forms of social organization that limit the exercise of personal freedom quite as drastically as did the penurious and technologically primitive society of the past. Even today it is as difficult for a great many people in our society to think of themselves as autonomous participants in a joint and voluntary shaping of their lives as it ever was for their fellows of another day. There are even more pessimistic observers who see the whole stretch of post-Renaissance Western history with its ideal of personal autonomy as a kind of false dawn which, they believe, is now yielding to a quite different kind of society in which individual freedom will not be a value at all. However that may be, there can be no denying the existence of forces within our societies and perhaps within ourselves as well that make for depersonalization and moral passivity, whether we view these as survivals from a dark past or as harbingers of an even darker future. While these persist, they will in greater or lesser measure hinder the emergence of a society in which, through reciprocal recognition and acceptance, human beings can jointly and freely participate in the direction of their own affairs. And as long as that goal is not achieved, one may hope that existentialism—under whatever name—with its insistent emphasis on the centrality within human nature of the capacity for constructing alternatives and for choosing among them, will elicit an intelligent and serious response.