

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

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

The word “subjectivism” has two possible interpretations, and our opponents play with both of them, at our expense. Subjectivism means, on the one hand, the freedom of the individual subject to choose what he will be, and, on the other, man’s inability to transcend human subjectivity. The fundamental meaning of existentialism resides in the latter. When we say that man chooses himself, not only do we mean that each of us must choose himself, but also that in choosing himself, he is choosing for all men. In fact, in creating the man each of us wills ourselves to be, there is not a single one of our actions that does not at the same time create an image of man as we think he *ought* to be. Choosing to be this or that is to affirm at the same time the value of what we choose, because we can never choose evil. We always choose the good, and nothing can be good for any of us unless it is good for all. If, moreover, existence precedes essence and we will to exist at the same time as we fashion our image, that image is valid for all and for our whole era.

Our responsibility is thus much greater than we might have supposed, because it concerns all mankind. If I am a worker and I choose to join a Christian trade union rather than to become a Communist, and if, by that membership, I choose to signify that resignation is, after all, the most suitable solution for man, and that the kingdom of man is not on this earth, I am not committing myself

alone—I am choosing to be resigned on behalf of all—consequently my action commits all mankind. Or, to use a more personal example, if I decide to marry and have children—granted such a marriage proceeds solely from my own circumstances, my passion, or my desire—I am nonetheless committing not only myself, but all of humanity, to the practice of monogamy. I am therefore responsible for myself and for everyone else, and I am fashioning a certain image of man as I choose him to be. In choosing myself, I choose man.

This allows us to understand the meaning behind some rather lofty-sounding words such as “anguish,” “abandonment,” and “despair.” As you are about to see, it is all quite simple.

## [EXISTENTIAL EMOTIONS]

### [A. Anguish]

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

### [B. Abandonment]

When we speak of “abandonment”—one of Heidegger’s favorite expressions—we merely mean to say that God does not exist, and that we must bear the full consequences of that assertion. Existentialists are strongly opposed to a certain type of secular morality that seeks to eliminate God as painlessly as possible. Around 1880, when some French professors attempted to formulate a secular morality, they expressed it more or less in these words: God is a useless and costly hypothesis, so we will do without it. However, if we are to have a morality, a civil society, and a law-abiding world, it is essential that certain values be taken seriously; they must have an *a priori*<sup>5</sup> existence ascribed to them. It must be considered mandatory *a priori* for people to be honest, not to lie, not to beat their wives, to raise children, and so forth. We therefore will need to do a little

<sup>5</sup>*a priori*: independent of personal experience or judgment (literally, in Latin, “from what comes earlier”). [D. C. ABEL]