

more thinking on this subject in order to show that such values exist all the same, and that they are inscribed in an intelligible heaven, even though God does not exist. In other words—and I think this is the gist of everything that we in France call “radicalism”—nothing will have changed if God does not exist; we will encounter the same standards of honesty, progress, and humanism, and we will have turned God into an obsolete hypothesis that will die out quietly on its own.

Existentialists, on the other hand, find it extremely disturbing that God no longer exists, for along with his disappearance goes the possibility of finding values in an intelligible heaven. There could no longer be any *a priori* good, since there would be no infinite and perfect consciousness to conceive of it. Nowhere is it written that good exists, that we must be honest or must not lie, since we are on a plane shared only by men. Dostoyevsky<sup>6</sup> once wrote: “If God does not exist, everything is permissible.” This is the starting point of existentialism. Indeed, everything is permissible if God does not exist, and man is consequently abandoned, for he cannot find anything to rely on—neither within nor without. First, he finds there are no excuses. For if it is true that existence precedes essence, we can never explain our actions by reference to a given and immutable human nature. In other words, there is no determinism<sup>7</sup>—man is free, man is freedom. If, however, God does not exist, we will encounter no values or orders that can legitimize our conduct. Thus, we have neither behind us nor before us, in the luminous realm of values, any means of justification or excuse. We are left alone and without excuse. That is what I mean when I say that man is condemned to be free: condemned, because he did not create himself, yet nonetheless free, because once cast into the world, he is responsible for everything he does. Existentialists do not believe in the power of passion. They will never regard a great passion as a devastating torrent that inevitably compels man to commit certain acts and which, therefore, is an excuse. They think that man is responsible for his own passion. Neither do existentialists believe that man can find refuge in some given sign that will guide him on earth; they think that man interprets the sign as he pleases and that man is therefore without any support or help, condemned at all times to invent man. In an excellent article, Ponge once wrote: “Man is the future of man.”<sup>8</sup> This is absolutely true. However, if we were to interpret this to mean that such a future is inscribed in heaven, and that God knows what it is, that would be false, for then it would no longer even be a future. If, on the other hand, it means that whatever man may appear to be, there is a future waiting to be created—a virgin future—then the saying is true. But for now, we are abandoned.

To give you an example that will help you to better understand what we mean by abandonment, I will mention the case of one of my students, who sought me out under the following circumstances. His father had broken off with his mother and, moreover, was inclined to be a “collaborator.”<sup>9</sup> His older

<sup>6</sup>Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821–1881) was a Russian novelist. [D. C. ABEL]

<sup>7</sup>determinism: the doctrine that all human actions are determined by preceding causes and that we can never act otherwise than we do. [D. C. ABEL]

<sup>8</sup>Francis Ponge, “Notes premières de l’homme,” *Les Temps modernes* 1 (October 1945): 75. [C. MACOMBER, TRANSLATOR] Ponge (1889–1988) was a French poet and essayist. [D. C. ABEL]

<sup>9</sup>collaborator: one who collaborated the Nazis during their occupation of France during World War II. [D. C. ABEL]

brother had been killed in the German offensive of 1940, and this young man, with primitive but noble feelings, wanted to avenge him. His mother, living alone with him and deeply hurt by the partial betrayal of his father and the death of her oldest son, found her only comfort in him. At the time, the young man had the choice of going to England to join the Free French Forces—which would mean abandoning his mother—or remaining by her side to help her go on with her life. He realized that his mother lived only for him and that his absence—perhaps his death—would plunge her into utter despair. He also realized that, ultimately, any action he might take on her behalf would provide the concrete benefit of helping her to live, while any action he might take to leave and fight would be of uncertain outcome and could disappear pointlessly like water in sand. For instance, in trying to reach England, he might pass through Spain and be detained there indefinitely in a camp; or, after arriving in England or Algiers, he might be assigned to an office to do paperwork. He was therefore confronted by two totally different modes of action: one mode that was concrete and immediate, but directed toward only one individual; the other involving an infinitely vaster group—a national corps—but a mode that was more ambiguous, for that very reason, and could be interrupted before being carried out. And, at the same time, he was vacillating between two kinds of morality: a morality motivated by sympathy and individual devotion, and another morality with a broader scope, but less likely to be fruitful. He had to choose between the two.

What could help him make that choice? The Christian doctrine? No. The Christian doctrine tells us we must be charitable, love our neighbor, sacrifice ourselves for others, choose the “narrow way,” and so on. But what is the narrow way? Whom should we love like a brother—the soldier or the mother? Which is the more useful aim—the vague one of fighting as part of a group, or the more concrete one of helping one particular person keep on living? Who can decide that *a priori*? No one. No code of ethics on record answers that question. Kantian morality instructs us to never treat another as a means, but always as an end.<sup>10</sup> Very well; therefore, if I stay with my mother, I will treat her as an end, not as a means. But by the same token, I will be treating those who are fighting on my behalf as a means. Conversely, if I join those who are fighting, I will treat them as an end, and, in so doing, risk treating my mother as a means.

If values are vague and if they are always too broad in scope to apply to the specific and concrete case under consideration, we have no choice but to rely on our instincts. That is what this young man tried to do, and when I last saw him, he was saying: “All things considered, it is feelings that matter; I should choose what truly compels me to follow a certain path. If I feel that I love my mother enough to sacrifice everything else for her—my desire for vengeance, my desire for action, my desire for adventure—then I should stay by her side. If, to the contrary, I feel that my love for my mother is not strong enough, I should go.” But how can we measure the strength of a feeling? What gave any value to the young man’s feelings for his mother? Precisely the fact that he chose to stay with her. I may say that I love a friend well enough to sacrifice a certain sum of money

<sup>10</sup>This moral doctrine of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) appears in this book, pp. 347–357. For a biography of Kant, see p. 175. [D. C. ABEL]