

for his sake, but I can claim that only if I have done so. I can say that I love my mother enough to stay by her side only if I actually stayed with her. The only way I can measure the strength of this affection is precisely by performing an action that confirms and defines it. However, since I am depending on this affection to justify my action, I find myself caught in a vicious circle.

Moreover, as Gide¹¹ once pointed out, it is almost impossible to distinguish between playacting and true feelings. To decide that I love my mother and will stay with her, or to stay with her by putting on a charade, amount to the same thing. In other words, feelings are developed through the actions we take; therefore I cannot use them as guidelines for action. This means that I shouldn't seek within myself some authentic state that will compel me to act, any more than I can expect any morality to provide the concepts that will enable me to act. You may say "Well, he went to see a professor for advice." But if you consult a priest, for instance, it's you who has chosen to consult him, and you already know in your heart, more or less, what advice he is likely to give. In other words, to choose one's adviser is only another way to commit oneself. This is demonstrated by the fact that, if you are Christian, you will say: "Consult a priest." But there are collaborating priests, temporizing priests, and priests connected to the Resistance.¹² Which do you choose? Had this young man chosen to consult a priest connected to the Resistance, or a collaborating priest, he would have decided beforehand what kind of advice he was to receive. Therefore, in seeking me out, he knew what my answer would be, and there was only one answer I could give him: "You are free, so choose; in other words, invent. No general code of ethics can tell you what you ought to do; there are no signs in this world."

Catholics will reply: "But there *are* signs!" Be that as it may, it is I who choose what those signs mean. When I was in a German prison camp, I met a rather remarkable man, who happened to be a Jesuit.¹³ This is how he came to join the order: He had experienced several frustrating setbacks in his life. His father died while he was still a child, leaving him in poverty, but he was awarded a scholarship to a religious institution where he was constantly reminded that he had been accepted only out of charity. He was subsequently denied a number of distinctions and honors that would have pleased any child. Then, when he was about 18 years old, he had an unfortunate love affair that broke his heart. Finally, at the age of 22, what should have been a trifle was actually the last straw: He flunked out of military training school. This young man had every right to believe he was a total failure. It was a sign—but a sign of what? He could have sought refuge in bitterness or despair. Instead—and it was very clever of him—he chose to take it as a sign that he was not destined for secular success, and that his achievements would be attained only in the realms of religion, sanctity, and faith. He saw in all of this a message from God, and so he joined the order. Who can doubt that the meaning of the sign was determined by him, and by him alone? We might have concluded something

¹¹André Gide (1859–1951) was a French novelist, essayist, and critic. [D. C. ABEL]

¹²*Resistance*: an underground movement that resisted the Nazi occupation of France during World War II. [D. C. ABEL]

¹³*Jesuit*: a member of the Society of Jesus, a Roman Catholic religious order. [D. C. ABEL]

quite different from this set of reversals—for example, that he might have been better off training to be a carpenter or a revolutionary. He therefore bears the full responsibility for his interpretation of the sign. This is what "abandonment" implies: It is we ourselves who decide who we are to be. Such abandonment entails anguish.

[C. Despair]

As for "despair," it has a very simple meaning: It means that we must limit ourselves to reckoning only with those things that depend on our will, or on the set of probabilities that enable action. Whenever we desire something, there are always elements of probability. If I am counting on a visit from a friend who is traveling by train or trolley, then I assume that the train will arrive on time, or that the trolley will not derail. I operate within a realm of possibilities. But we credit such possibilities only to the strict extent that our action encompasses them. From the moment that the possibilities I am considering cease to be rigorously engaged by my action, I must no longer take interest in them, for no God or greater design can bend the world and its possibilities to my will. In the final analysis, when Descartes said "Conquer yourself rather than the world," he actually meant the same thing: We should act without hope. Marxists,¹⁴ with whom I have discussed this, reply: "Obviously, your action will be limited by your death; but you can rely on the help of others. You can count both on what others are doing elsewhere, in China, in Russia, to help you, and on what they will do later—that is, after your death—to carry on your work and bring it to fruition, which will be the revolution. What is more, you *must* rely on it; not to do so would be immoral."

My initial response to this is that I will always depend on my comrades-in-arms in the struggle, inasmuch as they are committed, as I am, to a definite common cause, in the solidarity of a party or a group that I can more or less control—that is to say, a party that I joined as a militant and whose every move is familiar to me. In that context, counting on the solidarity and will of this party is exactly like counting on the fact that the train will arrive on time, or that the trolley will not derail. But I cannot count on men whom I do not know based on faith in the goodness of humanity or in man's interest in society's welfare, given that man is free and there is no human nature in which I can place my trust. I do not know where the Russian Revolution might lead. I can admire it and hold it up as an example to the extent that it is clear, to date, that the proletariat¹⁵ plays a part in Russia that it has attained in no other nation. But I cannot assert that this Revolution will necessarily lead to the triumph of the proletariat; I must confine myself to what I can see. Nor can I be certain that comrades-in-arms will carry on my work after my death and bring it to completion, seeing that those men are free and will freely choose, tomorrow, what man is to become. Tomorrow, after

¹⁴*Marxists*: followers of the socialist doctrine of the German philosopher Karl Marx. For a biography of Marx, see p. 466. [D. C. ABEL]

¹⁵*proletariat*: wage-laborers; contrasted in Marxism with the *bourgeoisie* (capitalists, who own the means of production). For Marx's discussion of these classes, see pp. 467–473. [D. C. ABEL]