

Kierkegaard's most systematic work, written pseudonymously, is his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. In selections from that work included here, he explains his central notion of subjective truth, a concept that supports the earlier arguments in *Either/Or* and *Fear and Trembling*, and is crucial to his understanding of faith. The opening selection, from *The Present Age*, is a relatively late work (1846) that captures, as well as any other document of the existentialist movement, the temperament of personal revolt and sense of "untimeliness" that these thinkers share. This theme is expanded in Kierkegaard's justly famous polemic against "the crowd as untruth," from his *On the Point of View for My Work as an Author*, which is excerpted toward the end of the selections. And, because so much of Kierkegaard's best writing is to be found in scattered entries in his notebooks and journals—indeed, he always insisted on the "unsystematic" nature of good philosophy—I have placed a sampling of them among the longer selections.

❖ from *The Present Age* ❖ 1846

The present age is fundamentally one of prudence and reflection, without passion, momentarily bursting into enthusiasm, and shrewdly relapsing into repose.

If we had actuarial tables of the consumption of discretion from generation to generation as we have for liquor, we would be astonished at the tremendous amount of care and deliberation consumed by small, prosperous families living quietly, and at the quantity which the young and even children put away, for just as the Children's Crusade may be said to typify the Middle Ages, precocious children are typical of the present age. In fact one is tempted to ask whether there is even one left ready, for once, to act outrageously. These days not even a suicide kills himself in desperation; before taking the step he reflects so long and so thoroughly that he literally chokes with the idea, making one even wonder whether he should be called a suicide,

From The Present Age by Søren Kierkegaard, translated by Clancy Martin and published with the permission of Clancy Martin.

4 / Passion vs Reflected
 desperate, outrage, action, rebellion
 prudence, remorse, shrewd intelligence
 Existentialism / looks

since it is thought itself which takes his life. He does not die *with* reflection but *from* reflection. It would therefore be very hard to prosecute the present generation on account of its legal difficulties: indeed, its ability, skill, and prudence consist in attempting to reach a judgment and a decision without ever going so far as action.

If it may be said of the revolutionary period that it runs amok, it should be said of the present that it runs poorly. The individual and his generation are always contradicting one another, and therefore a prosecuting attorney would find it all but impossible to admit any fact into evidence: because nothing really happens. To judge from the abundance of circumstantial evidence, one would conclude that something truly exceptional had either just occurred or was about to occur. Yet any such conclusions would indeed be mistaken. True, indications are the sole achievement of the age; and its virtuosity and creativity in constructing enthralling illusions, its spurts of enthusiasm, employing as a misleading escape some projected change of form, must be ranked as high in the scale of cleverness and of the negative use of strength as the passionate, creative energy of the revolution in the corresponding scale of energy. But the present generation, exhausted by its deceitful efforts, relapses into total indolence.

* } Its condition is that of one who has only fallen asleep towards morning: first of all come great dreams, then a feeling of laziness, and finally a witty or clever excuse for staying in bed.

• • •

A revolutionary age is an age of action; ours is the age of advertisement and publicity. Nothing ever happens but there is instantaneous publicity everywhere. In the present age a rebellion is of all things the most unthinkable. Such a manifestation of strength would seem preposterous to the shrewd intelligence of our time. On the other hand, a political virtuoso might accomplish something nearly as extraordinary. He might write a manifesto proposing a general assembly at which people should resolve upon a rebellion, and it would be so prudently written that even the censor would let it pass. At the meeting itself he would be able to create the impression that his audience had rebelled, after which they would all go quietly home—having enjoyed a very pleasant evening.

• • •

publicity of non-events as events
 experience non-event as event
 self-appearance,

enthusiasm (unifying principle) vs envy (negative unifying principle) / becomes ressentiment
 Søren Kierkegaard 5

This reflective tension ultimately forms itself into a principle, and just as in a passionate age enthusiasm is the unifying principle, so in an age which is very reflective and passionless envy is the negative unifying principle. However, this must not be understood as an ethical complaint; to put it one way, the idea of reflection is envy, and so it is twofold in its action: it is selfish in the individual, and it results in the selfishness of the society around him, which therefore works against him.

But the further it goes, the more obviously does reflection's envy become a moral ressentiment. Just as air in a closed space becomes poisonous, so the imprisonment of reflection develops a blamable ressentiment if it is not ventilated by action or event of some kind. In reflection the condition of strain (or tension as we called it) results in the annulment of all the higher powers, and all that is low and contemptible comes forward, its very impudence given the spurious effect of strength, while shielded by its very lowness it avoids attracting the attention of ressentiment.

It is a basic truth of human nature that mankind cannot stay always on the heights, nor constantly admire anything. Human nature demands variety. Even in the most enthusiastic ages people have always like to joke enviously about their superiors. That is fair enough and is perfectly reasonable so long as after having laughed at the great they can once more admire them; otherwise the game is not worth the candle. In this way ressentiment finds a release even in an enthusiastic age. And so long as an age, although less enthusiastic, has the strength to grant ressentiment its actual character and has recognized what its expression signifies, ressentiment has its own, though dangerous, importance. . . .

Contrarily, the more reflection gains the upper hand and so makes people listless, the more dangerous ressentiment becomes, because it no longer has enough character to make it conscious of its significance. Without that character reflection is cowardly and wandering, and depending on the circumstances understands the same thing in different ways. It attempts to treat it as a joke, and if that won't work, to regard it as an insult, and when that fails, to dismiss it as nothing at all; or else it will regard the thing as a little witticism, and if that fails then insist that it was intended as a moral satire deserving attention, and if that won't work, add that it is not worth worrying over.

• • •

envy
 unjustified
 moral anger
 reflect = blame
 denial
 (weak illusion of strength)

product of complaint

Leveling

The *ressentiment* which is *establishing itself* is the process of leveling, and while a passionate age storms ahead erecting new things and tearing down old, raising and demolishing as it goes, a reflective and passionless age does just the opposite: it interferes with and suppresses all action; it levels. Leveling is a quiet, mathematical, and abstract occupation which avoids upheavals.

• • •

of Hegel

The Public

In order that everything may be reduced to the same level it is first of all necessary to find a phantom, its spirit, a monstrous abstraction, an all-embracing something which is nothing, a mirage: and that phantom is *the public*. It is only in an age without passion, which is yet reflective, that such a phantom can develop itself with the aid of the press which itself becomes an abstraction. In times of passion and commotion and enthusiasm, even when a people want to achieve a pointless idea and bring down and destroy everything: even then there is no such thing as a public.

• • •

Public everyone

each indiv. becomes myth in the public but no humanity no subjectivity no rights duality.

A public is everything and nothing, the most dangerous of all powers and the most trifling: one can speak to an entire nation in the name of the public and still the public is less than a single real person however modest. The stipulation *public* is produced by the deceptive juggling of an age of reflection which makes it seem flattering to the individual who in this way can claim for himself this monster which makes concrete realities seem meager. The public is the fairy tale of an age of understanding which in imagination transforms the individual into something even greater than a king above his people; but the public is also a gruesome abstraction by which the individual receives his religious characterization—or sinks.

❖ from The Journals ❖

* People rarely make use of the freedom they have, for example, freedom of thought, instead they demand freedom of speech as compensation.

From The Journals by Søren Kierkegaard, translated by Clancy Martin and published with the permission of Clancy Martin. (Ed. note: this acknowledgment also covers the excerpts from The Journals on pp. 26 and 29.)

❖ Concerning the Dedication to "The Individual" ❖

There is a view of life which conceives that where the crowd is, there also is the truth, and that in truth itself there is need of having the crowd on its side. There is another view of life which conceives that wherever there is a crowd there is untruth, so that (to consider for a moment the extreme case), even if every individual, each for himself in private, were to be in possession of the truth, yet in case they were all to get together in a crowd—a crowd to which any sort of decisive significance is attributed, a voting, noisy, audible crowd—untruth would at once be in evidence.

CROWD (PUBLIC)

• • •

A crowd—not this crowd or that, the crowd now living or the crowd long deceased, a crowd of humble people or of superior people, of rich or of poor, &c.—a crowd in its very concept is the untruth, by reason of the fact that it renders the individual completely impenitent and irresponsible, or at least weakens his sense of responsibility by reducing it to a fraction. Observe that there was not one single soldier that dared lay hands upon Caius Marius—this was an instance of truth. But given merely three or four women with the consciousness or the impression that they were a crowd, and with hope of a sort in the possibility that no one could say definitely who was doing it or who began it—then they had courage for it. What a falsehood! The falsehood first of all is the notion that the crowd does what in fact only the individual in the crowd does, though it be every individual. For 'crowd' is an abstraction and has no hands; but each individual has ordinarily two hands, and so when an individual lays his two hands upon Caius Marius they are the two hands of the individual, certainly not those of his neighbour, and still less those of the . . . crowd which has no hands. In the next place, the falsehood is that the crowd had the 'courage' for it, for no one of the individuals was ever so cowardly as the crowd always is. For every individual who flees for refuge into the crowd, and so flees in cowardice from being an individual (who had not the courage to lay his hands

Action always individual

Women stand = vice

To seek refuge in indiv. self

From The Point of View for My Work As an Author by Søren Kierkegaard, translated by Walter Lowrie. Copyright 1962 by Harper and Row, Inc.

upon Caius Marius, nor even to admit that he had it not), such a man contributes his share of cowardliness to the cowardliness which we know as the 'crowd'.—Take the highest example, think of Christ—and the whole human race, all the men that ever were born or are to be born. But let the situation be one that challenges the individual, requiring each one for himself to be alone with Him in a solitary place and as an individual to step up to Him and spit upon Him—the man never was born and never will be born with courage or insolence enough to do such a thing. This is untruth.

❖ What Do I Want? ❖

March 31, 1855.

Quite simply: I want honesty. I am not, as well-meaning people have represented me—for I can pay no attention to the representations of me advanced by exasperation and anger and impotence and nonsense—I am not a Christian severity as opposed to a Christian leniency.

not ease + certainty

By no means, I am neither leniency nor severity—I am: a human honesty.

concern w/ easy way of being Christian > rejected by K.

The leniency which is the ordinary Christianity here in the land, I want to hold up to the New Testament in order to see how these two relate to one another.

Then if it appears, if I or another can show, that it is equal to the New Testament's Christianity: then with the greatest happiness I will agree to it.

But one thing I will not do, not for any, any price: I will not by suppression or by performing tricks try to produce the impression that the ordinary Christianity in the land and the New Testament's Christianity are like one another.

From Kierkegaard's letters, translated by Clancy Martin and published with the permission of Clancy Martin.

to live. We are not lumps of clay, and what is important is not what people make of us but what we ourselves make of what they have made of us. By virtue of the option which they have taken on his being, the decent folk have made it necessary for a child to decide about himself prematurely. We can surmise that this decision will be of capital importance. Yes, one *must* decide. To kill oneself is also to decide. He has chosen to live; he has said, in defiance of all, I will be the Thief. I deeply admire this child who grimly *willed* himself at an age when *we* were merely playing the servile buffoon. So fierce a will to survive, such pure courage, such mad confidence within despair will bear their fruit. Twenty years later, this absurd determination will produce the poet Jean Genet.

❖ Marxism and Existentialism ❖

Philosophy appears to some people as a homogeneous milieu: there thoughts are born and die, there systems are built, and there, in turn, they collapse. Others take Philosophy for a specific attitude which we can freely adopt at will. Still others see it as a determined segment of culture. In our view Philosophy does not exist. In whatever form we consider it, this shadow of science, this Gray Eminence of humanity, is only a hypostatized abstraction. Actually, there are *philosophies*. Or rather—for you would never at the same time find more than *one* living philosophy—under certain well-defined circumstances a philosophy is developed for the purpose of giving expression to the general movement of the society. So long as a philosophy is alive, it serves as a cultural milieu for its contemporaries. This disconcerting object presents itself *at the same time* under profoundly distinct aspects, the unification of which it is continually effecting.

A philosophy is first of all a particular way in which the “rising” class becomes conscious of itself.¹ This consciousness may be clear

From Search for a Method by Jean-Paul Sartre, translated by Hazel E. Barnes. Copyright 1963 by Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc.

¹ If I do not mention here the person who is objectified and revealed in his work, it is because the philosophy of a period extends far beyond the philosopher who first gave it shape—no matter how great he may be. But conversely we shall see that the

or confused, indirect or direct. At the time of the *noblesse de robe*² and of mercantile capitalism, a bourgeoisie of lawyers, merchants, and bankers gained a certain self-awareness through Cartesianism; a century and a half later, in the primitive stage of industrialization, a bourgeoisie of manufacturers, engineers, and scientists dimly discovered itself in the image of universal man which Kantianism offered to it.

• • •

If philosophy is to be simultaneously a totalization of knowledge, a method, a regulative Idea, an offensive weapon, and a community of language, if this “vision of the world” is also an instrument which ferments rotten societies, if this particular conception of a man or of a group of men becomes the culture and sometimes the nature of a whole class—then it is very clear that the periods of philosophical creation are rare. Between the seventeenth century and the twentieth, I see three such periods, which I would designate by the names of the men who dominated them: there is the “moment” of Descartes and Locke, that of Kant and Hegel, finally that of Marx. These three philosophies become, each in its turn, the humus of every particular thought and the horizon of all culture; there is no going beyond them so long as man has not gone beyond the historical moment which they express. I have often remarked on the fact that an “anti-Marxist” argument is only the apparent rejuvenation of a pre-Marxist idea. A so-called “going beyond” Marxism will be at worst only a return to pre-Marxism; at best, only the rediscovery of a thought already contained in the philosophy which one believes he has gone beyond. As for “revisionism,” this is either a truism or an absurdity. There is no need to readapt a living philosophy to the course of the world; it adapts itself by means of thousands of new efforts, thousands of particular pursuits, for the philosophy is one with the movement of so-

study of particular doctrines is inseparable from a real investigation of philosophies. Cartesianism illuminates the period and situates Descartes within the totalitarian development of analytical reason; in these terms, Descartes, taken as a person and as a philosopher, clarifies the historical (hence the particular) meaning of the new rationality up to the middle of the eighteenth century.

² Noblesse de robe was originally the designation given in France to those members of the bourgeoisie who were awarded titles of nobility in recognition of outstanding achievement or service to the State. Later it was used loosely to refer to any “new” nobility. (Translator’s note.)

ciety. Despite their good intentions, those very people who believe themselves to be the most faithful spokesmen for their predecessors transform the thoughts which they want simply to repeat; methods are modified because they are applied to new objects. If this movement on the part of the philosophy no longer exists, one of two things is true: either the philosophy is dead or it is going through a "crisis." In the first case there is no question of revising, but of razing a rotten building; in the second case the "philosophical crisis" is the particular expression of a social crisis, and its immobility is conditioned by the contradictions which split the society. A so-called "revision," performed by "experts," would be, therefore, only an idealist mystification without real significance. It is the very movement of History, the struggle of men on all planes and on all levels of human activity, which will set free captive thought and permit it to attain its full development.

Those intellectuals who come after the great flowering and who undertake to set the systems in order or to use the new methods to conquer territory not yet fully explored, those who provide practical applications for the theory and employ it as a tool to destroy and to construct—they should not be called philosophers. They cultivate the domain, they take an inventory, they erect certain structures there, they may even bring about certain internal changes; but they still get their nourishment from the living thought of the great dead. They are borne along by the crowd on the march, and it is the crowd which constitutes their cultural milieu and their future, which determines the field of their investigations, and even of their "creation."

These *relative* men I propose to call "ideologists." And since I am to speak of existentialism, let it be understood that I take it to be an "ideology." It is a parasitical system living on the margin of Knowledge, which at first it opposed but into which today it seeks to be integrated.

as existentialism
as ideology

• • •

[Conclusion to *Search for a Method*]

These considerations enable us to understand why we can at the same time declare that we are in profound agreement with Marxist philosophy and yet for the present maintain the autonomy of the ex-

istential ideology. There is no doubt, indeed, that Marxism appears today to be the only possible anthropology which can be at once historical and structural. It is the only one which at the same time takes man in his totality—that is, in terms of the materiality of his condition. Nobody can propose to it another point of departure, for this would be to offer to it *another man* as the object of its study. It is *inside* the movement of Marxist thought that we discover a flaw of such a sort that despite itself Marxism tends to eliminate the questioner from his investigation and to make of the questioned the object of an absolute Knowledge. The very notions which Marxist research employs to describe our historical society—exploitation, alienation, fetishizing, reification, etc.—are precisely those which most immediately refer to existential structures. The very notion of *praxis* and that of dialectic—inseparably bound together—are contradictory to the intellectualist idea of a knowledge. And to come to the most important point, *labor*, as man's reproduction of his life, can hold no meaning if its fundamental structure is not to project. In view of this default—which pertains to the historical development and not to the actual principles of the doctrine—existentialism, at the heart of Marxism and taking the same givens, the same Knowledge, as its point of departure, must attempt in its turn—at least as an experiment—the dialectical interpretation of History. It puts nothing in question except a mechanistic determinism which is not exactly Marxist and which has been introduced from the outside into this total philosophy. Existentialism, too, wants to situate man in his class and in the conflicts which oppose him to other classes, starting with the mode and the relations of production. But it can approach this "situation" in terms of existence—that is, of comprehension. It makes itself the questioned and the question as questioner; it does not, as Kierkegaard did apropos of Hegel, set the irrational singularity of the individual in opposition to universal Knowledge. But into this very Knowledge and into the universality of concepts, it wants to reintroduce the unsurpassable singularity of the human adventure.

Thus the comprehension of existence is presented as the human foundation of Marxist anthropology. Nevertheless, we must beware here of a confusion heavy with consequences. In fact, in the order of Knowledge, what we know concerning the principle or the foundations of a scientific structure, even when it has come—as is ordinarily the case—later than the empirical determinations, is set forth first; and one deduces from it the determinations of Knowledge in the

same way that one constructs a building after having secured its foundations. But this is because the foundation is itself a knowing; and if one can deduce from it certain propositions already guaranteed by experience, this is because one has induced it in terms of them as the most general hypothesis. In contrast, the foundation of Marxism, as a historical, structural anthropology, is man himself inasmuch as human existence and the comprehension of the human are inseparable. Historically Marxist Knowledge produces its foundation at a certain moment of its development, and this foundation is presented in a disguised form. It does not appear as the practical foundations of the theory, but as that which, on principle, pushes forward all theoretical knowing. Thus the singularity of existence is presented in Kierkegaard as that which on principle is kept outside the Hegelian system (that is, outside total Knowledge), as that which can in no way be *thought* but only *lived* in the act of faith. The dialectical procedure to reintegrate existence (which is never *known*) as a foundation at the heart of Knowledge could not be attempted then, since neither of the current attitudes—an idealist Knowledge, a spiritual existence—could lay claim to concrete actualization. These two terms outlined abstractly the future contradiction. And the development of anthropological knowing could not lead then to the synthesis of these formal positions: the movement of ideas—as the movement of society—had first to produce Marxism as the only possible form of a really concrete Knowledge. And as we indicated at the beginning, Marx's own Marxism, while indicating the dialectical opposition between knowing and being, contained implicitly the demand for an existential foundation for the theory. Furthermore, in order for notions like reification and alienation to assume their full meaning, it would have been necessary for the questioner and the questioned to be made one. What must be the nature of human relations in order for these relations to be capable of appearing in certain definite societies as the relations of things to each other? If the reification of human relations is possible, it is because these relations, even if reified, are fundamentally distinct from the relations of things. What kind of practical organism is this which reproduces its life by its work so that its work and ultimately its very reality are alienated; that is, so that they, *as others*, turn back upon him and determine him? But before Marxism, itself a product of the social conflict, could turn to these problems, it had to assume fully its role as a practical philosophy—that is, as a theory clarifying social and political *praxis*. The re-

sult is a profound *lack* within contemporary Marxism; the use of the notions mentioned earlier—and many others—refers to a comprehension of human reality which is missing. And this lack is not—as some Marxists declare today—a localized void, a hole in the construction of Knowledge. It is inapprehensible and yet everywhere present; it is a general anemia.

• • •

It is precisely this expulsion of man, his exclusion from Marxist Knowledge, which resulted in the renaissance of existentialist thought outside the historical totalization of Knowledge. Human science is frozen in the non-human, and human-reality seeks to understand itself outside of science. But this time the opposition comes from those who directly demand their synthetic transcendence. Marxism will degenerate into a non-human anthropology if it does not reintegrate man into itself as its foundation. But this comprehension, which is nothing other than existence itself, is disclosed at the same time by the historical movement of Marxism, by the concepts which indirectly clarify it (alienation, etc.), and by the new alienations which give birth to the contradictions of socialist society and which reveal to it its abandonment; that is, the incommensurability of existence and practical Knowledge. The movement can *think* itself only in Marxist terms and can *comprehend* itself only as an alienated existence, as a human-reality made into a thing. The moment which will surpass this opposition must reintegrate comprehension into Knowledge as its non-theoretical foundation.

In other words, the foundation of anthropology is man himself, not as the object of practical Knowledge, but as a practical organism producing Knowledge as a moment of its *praxis*. And the reintegration of man as a concrete existence into the core of anthropology, as its constant support, appears necessarily as a stage in the process of philosophy's "becoming-the-world." In this sense the foundation of anthropology cannot precede it (neither historically nor logically). If *existence*, in its free comprehension of itself, preceded the awareness of alienation or of exploitation, it would be necessary to suppose that the free development of the practical organism historically preceded its present fall and captivity. (And if this were established, the historical precedence would scarcely advance us in our comprehension, since the retrospective study of vanished societies is made today with the enlightenment furnished by techniques for reconstruction and by

means of the alienations which enchain us.) Or, if one insisted on a logical priority, it would be necessary to suppose that the freedom of the project could be recovered in its full reality *underneath* the alienations of our society and that one could move dialectically from the concrete existence which understands its freedom to the various alterations which distort it in present society. This hypothesis is absurd. To be sure, man can be enslaved only if he is free. But for the historical man who *knows* himself and *comprehends* himself, this practical freedom is grasped only as the permanent, concrete condition of his servitude; that is, across that servitude and by means of it as that which makes it possible, as its foundation. Thus Marxist Knowledge bears on the alienated man; but if it doesn't want to make a fetish of its knowing and to dissolve man in the process of knowing his alienations, then it is not enough to describe the working of capital or the system of colonization. It is necessary that the questioner understand how the questioned—that is, himself—*exists bis alienation*, how he surpasses it and is alienated in this very surpassing. It is necessary that his very thought should at every instant surpass the intimate contradiction which unites the comprehension of man-as-agent with the knowing of man-as-object and that it forge new concepts, new determinations of Knowledge which emerge from the existential comprehension and which regulate the movement of their contents by its dialectical procedure. Yet this comprehension—as a living movement of the practical organism—can take place only within a concrete situation, insofar as theoretical Knowledge illuminates and interprets this situation.

Thus the autonomy of existential studies results necessarily from the negative qualities of Marxists (and not from Marxism itself). So long as the doctrine does not recognize its anemia, so long as it founds its Knowledge upon a dogmatic metaphysics (a dialectic of Nature) instead of seeking its support in the comprehension of the living man, so long as it rejects as irrational those ideologies which wish, as Marx did, to separate being from Knowledge and, in anthropology, to found the knowing of man on human existence, existentialism will follow its own path of study. This means that it will attempt to clarify the givens of Marxist Knowledge by indirect knowing (that is, as we have seen, by words which regressively denote existential structures), and to engender within the framework of Marxism a veritable *comprehensive knowing* which will rediscover man in the social world and which will follow him in his *praxis*—or, if you prefer, in the project

which throws him toward the social possibles in terms of a defined situation. Existentialism will appear therefore as a fragment of the system, which has fallen outside of Knowledge. From the day that Marxist thought will have taken on the human dimension (that is, the existential project) as the foundation of anthropological Knowledge, existentialism will no longer have any reason for being. Absorbed, surpassed and conserved by the totalizing movement of philosophy, it will cease to be a particular inquiry and will become the foundation of all inquiry. The comments which we have made in the course of the present essay are directed—to the modest limit of our capabilities—toward hastening the moment of that dissolution.

❖ Sartre on Angst ❖

BENNY LEVY: You said to me once, "I've talked about despair, but that's bunk. I talked about it because other people were talking about it, because it was fashionable. Everyone was reading Kierkegaard then."

JEAN-PAUL SARTRE: That's right. Personally, I have never despaired, nor for one moment have I thought of despair as something that could possibly be a characteristic of mine. Yet I had to consider that despair must exist for other people, since they were talking about it. But it was a passing moment. I see that in many philosophers: Early in their work they talk from hearsay about some idea, they give it importance. Then, little by little, they stop talking about it, because they realize that for them its content doesn't exist—they've merely picked it up from other people.

From a series of interviews with Jean-Paul Sartre, conducted by Benny Levy, his assistant, in the last years before Sartre's death in April 1980. The interviews originally appeared in the French magazine Le Nouvel Observateur and are published in English translation in Hope Now: The 1980 Interviews, by the University of Chicago Press. Translated by Adrian van den Hoven.

Late 1800s
early 1900s

❖ *from* The Notebooks of
Malte Laurids Brigge ❖

How ridiculous. I sit here in my little room, I, Brigge, who am twenty-eight years old and completely unknown. I sit here and am nothing. And yet this nothing begins to think and thinks, five flights up, on a gray Paris afternoon, these thoughts:

Is it possible, it thinks, that we have not yet seen, known, or said anything real and important? Is it possible that we have had thousands of years to look, meditate, and record, and that we have let these thousands of years slip away like a recess at school, when there is just enough time to eat your sandwich and an apple?

Yes, it is possible.

Is it possible that despite our discoveries and advances, despite our culture, religion, and science, we have remained on the surface of life? Is it possible that even this surface, which might still have been something, has been covered with an incredibly tedious material, which makes it look like living-room furniture during the summer vacation?

Yes, it is possible.

. . . Is it possible that we say "women," "children," "boys," not suspecting (despite all our culture, not suspecting) that these words have long since had no plural, but only countless singulars?

Yes, it is possible.

Is it possible that there are people who say "God" and think that this is something they have in common?—Take a couple of school-boys: one buys a pocket knife, and the same day his friend buys another exactly like it. And after a week they compare knives, and it turns out that there is now just a very distant resemblance between them—so differently have they developed in different hands. ("Oh," says the mother of one, "you can't own *anything* without wearing it out in a day . . ."). In the same way: Is it possible to believe we could have a God without using him?

Yes, it is possible.

But if all this is possible, if it has even a semblance of possibility,—then surely, for the sake of everything in the world, something must

From The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge by Rainer Maria Rilke, translated by John Linton. Copyright 1997 by Oxford University Press.

be done. The first comer, the one who has had these alarming thoughts, must begin to do some of the things that have been neglected; even though he is just anyone, certainly not the most suitable person: since there is no one else. This young, insignificant foreigner, Brigge, will have to sit down in his room, five flights up, and keep writing, day and night. Yes, he will have to write; that is how it will end.

shifts from
'I' to 'we'
(we) as authority
or 'we' as self
humorous

individual
particular
not abstract
categories

in God

Miguel de Unamuno

(1864-1936)
SPANISH



Unamuno took great pride in the fact that his philosophy was distinctively Spanish. Writing just after the devastation of World War I until the eve of the Spanish Civil War, he was obsessed with the problems of coping with a life so filled with anxiety, brutality, and disappointment. Unamuno was one of those very individual voices, crying out passionately on behalf of honesty and integrity. He supported the Allies against Germany in the first World War and he opposed Francisco Franco, the fascist dictator. He wrote elegantly about the "tragic sense of life," in poetry and novels as well as in philosophical essays and literary commentary. Kierkegaard was Unamuno's philosophical hero, and he, too, bemoaned the failure of objective science and reason to answer life's questions and defended a version of subjective truth. According to Unamuno, passion and commitment are more important in life than reason and rationality. Reason inevitably leads to skepticism, and skepticism to despair. Faith, by contrast, offers its own guarantees, even if they are "only" subjective. "All or nothing," Unamuno would say. What a human being wants is immortality, nothing less. Reason and science tell us that immortality is impossible. Faith satisfies that ultimate demand. For Unamuno, one "philosophizes in order to live," not the other way around.

❖ from The Tragic Sense of Life ❖

Several times in the wandering course of these observations I have been bold enough to define, in spite of my horror of definitions, my own position vis-à-vis the problem I have been examining. But I know there is bound to be some dissatisfied reader, indoctrinated in some dogmatism or other, who will say: "This man cannot make up his mind; he vacillates; first he seems to assert one proposition, then he maintains the opposite; he is full of contradictions; it is impossible to place him. What is he?" There you have me: a man who affirms opposites, a man of contradiction and quarrel, as Jeremiah said of himself; a man who says one thing with his heart and the opposite with his head, and for whom this strife is the stuff of life. It is a clear-cut case, as clear as the water which flows from the melted snow upon the mountain tops.

I shall be told that mine is an untenable position, that a foundation is needed upon which to build our actions and our works, that it is impossible to live by contradictions, that unity and clarity are essential conditions for life and thought, and that it is imperative to unify the latter. And so we are back where we started from. For it is precisely this inner contradiction which unifies my life and gives it a practical purpose.

Or, rather, it is the conflict itself, this selfsame passionate uncertainty which unifies my action and causes me to live and work.

We think in order that we may live I have said, but perhaps it would be more correct to say that we think because we live, and that the form of our thought corresponds to the form of our life. Once more I must point out that our ethical and philosophical doctrines in general are no more than a posteriori justifications of our conduct, of our actions. Our doctrines are usually the means by which we seek to explain and justify to others and to ourselves our own mode of action—to ourselves, be it noted, as well as to others. The man who does not really know why he acts as he does, and not otherwise, feels the need to explain to himself his reason for so acting, and so he manufactures a motive. What we believe to be the motives for our conduct are usually mere pretexts. The reason which impels one

From *The Tragic Sense of Life* by Miguel de Unamuno, translated by Anthony Kerrigan. Published by Princeton University Press, Inc. (1972). Reprinted with permission of Princeton University Press, Inc.

life → thought (rejects of Hegel)
Conflict causes (is) unity and clarity for life
Rejects purpose unifies life for him this is "contradiction"
his view of himself ↓ identity @ essence

man carefully to preserve his life is the same reason given by another man for shooting himself in the head.

Nevertheless it cannot be denied that reasons, ideas, exert an influence on human actions, and sometimes even determine them by a process analogous to that of suggestion in the case of a hypnotized person, and this is due to the tendency of all ideas to resolve themselves in action—for an idea in itself is but an inchoate or aborted act. It was this tendency which suggested to Fouillée his theory of idea forces. But ordinarily ideas are forces which we reconcile with other deeper and much less conscious forces.

But leaving all this to one side for a moment, I should like to establish the fact that uncertainty, doubt, the perpetual wrestling with the mystery of our final destiny, the consequent mental despair, and the lack of any solid or stable dogmatic foundation, may all serve as basis for an ethic.

Whoever bases or thinks he bases his conduct—his inner or outward conduct, his feeling or his action—on a dogma or theoretical principle which he deems incontrovertible, runs the risk of becoming a fanatic; moreover, the moment this dogma shows any fissure or even any weakness, he finds the morality based on it giving way. If the ground he thought firm begins to rock, he himself trembles in the earthquake, for we are not all like the ideal Stoic who remains undaunted among the ruins of a world shattered to pieces. Luckily, the matter which underlies his ideas will tend to save him. For if a man should tell you that he does not defraud or cuckold his best friend because he fears hellfire, you may depend upon it that he would not do so even if he stopped believing in hell, but would instead invent some other excuse for not transgressing. And this truth is to the honor of the human race.

But whoever is convinced that he is sailing, perhaps without a set course, on an unstable or sinkable craft, will not be daunted if he finds the deck giving way beneath his feet and threatening to sink. For this type of man acts as he does, not because he believes his theory of action to be true, but because he believes that by acting thus he will make it true, prove it true, and that by thus acting he will create his spiritual world.

My conduct must be the best proof, the moral proof, of my supreme desire; and if I do not finally convince myself, within the limits of the ultimate and irremediable uncertainty, of the truth of what I hope for, it is because my conduct is not sufficiently pure. Virtue,

Reason can satisfy only (even in bad actions)

Basis for ethics (justified actions in: Avoid Dogma + Fatalism + Foundationalism)

What makes a principle true? By acting as one does

Faith in self + truth of act (+w/ +moral desire) is criterion

therefore, is not based upon dogma, but dogma upon virtue, and it is not faith which creates martyrs but rather martyrs who create faith. There is no security or repose—so far as security and repose are attainable in this life which is essentially insecure and lacking in repose—save in passionately good conduct.

• • •

What is the anti-rational truth of our heart? It is the immortality of the human soul, the truth of the persistence of our consciousness without any termination whatever, the human finality of the Universe. And what is its moral proof? We may formulate it thus: Act so that in your own judgement and in the judgement of others you may deserve eternity, act so that you may be irreplaceable, act so that you do not deserve death. Or perhaps thus: Act as if you were to die tomorrow, but only in order to survive and become eternal. The end-purpose of morality is to give personal, human finality to the Universe; to discover the finality it possesses—if it does in fact possess any—and discover it by acting.

More than a century ago, in 1804, the deepest and most intense of the spiritual sons of the patriarch Rousseau, most tragic of French men of feeling (not excluding Pascal), Sénancour . . . wrote the words . . . "Man is perishable. . . . That may be; but let us perish resisting, and if annihilation must be our portion, let us not make it a just one." If you change this sentence from a negative to a positive form—"And if annihilation must be our portion, let us make it an unjust reward."—you get the firmest basis for action by the man who cannot or will not be a dogmatist.

All men deserve to be saved, but, as I have said in the previous chapter, whoever desires immortality with a passion and even against all reason deserves it most of all. The writer H. G. Wells, who has given himself over to prophecy (not an uncommon phenomenon in his country), tells us in his *Anticipations* that "Active and capable men of all forms of religious profession today tend in practice to disregard the question of immortality altogether." And this is so because the religious professions of these active and capable men of whom Wells speaks are usually no more than a lie, and their lives are a lie, too, if they pretend to base them upon religion. But perhaps what Wells tells us is not basically as true as he and others like him imagine. Those active and capable men live in the midst of a society imbued with Christian principles, surrounded by institutions and social

Truth immortality of soul
① OR
② purpose of morality
↓
limits of human action

Basis for action

"unto ages of ages"

reactions produced by Christianity, so that a belief in the immortality of the soul runs deep in their own souls like a subterranean river, neither seen nor heard, but watering the roots of their deeds and their motives.

Catholic ethic as a set of foundations
↓
historians in means

In all truth it must be admitted that there exists no more solid foundation for morality than the foundation provided by the Catholic ethic. Man's end-purpose is eternal happiness, which consists in the vision and enjoyment of God in saecula saeculorum. Where that ethic errs however, is in the choice of means conducive to this end; for to make the attainment of eternal happiness dependent upon believing or not believing that the Holy Ghost proceeds from the Father and the Son and not from the Father alone, or in the divinity of Jesus, or in the theory of the hypostatic union, or even in the existence of God is nothing less than monstrous, as a moment's reflection will show. A human God—and we can conceive of no other—would never reject whoever could not believe in Him with his head; it is not in his head but in his heart that the wicked man says there is no God, that is: he does not want God to exist. If any belief could be linked with the attainment of eternal happiness it would be the belief in this happiness itself and in the possibility of attaining it.

passionate belief in eternal happiness
⊕ possibility of attaining it

Cf. Kant + Hegel

Happiness not duty as a final end.

And what shall we say of that other notion of the emperor of pedants, to the effect that we have not come into the world to be happy but to fulfill our duty ("Wir sind nicht auf der Welt, um glücklich zu sein, sondern um unsere Schuldigkeit zu tun")? If we are in this world for something (*um etwas*), whence can this for be derived but from the very essence of our own will, which asks for happiness and not duty as ultimate end? And if we were to attempt to attribute some other value to this for, an "objective value," as some Sadducean pedant might say, then we would have to recognize that this objective reality—the reality which would remain though humanity should disappear—is as indifferent to our duty as to our happiness, as little concerned with our morality as with our felicity. I am not aware that Jupiter, Uranus, or Sirius would allow their courses to be affected because we do or do not fulfill our duty any more than because we are or are not happy.

rejects of objective value

↓
necessity indifference to us

↑
mistakenly
↓
i must find value subjectively

• • •

The rationalist's dilemma—either the free act is possible, or it is not, either the event originates in me or is imposed on me from outside, does not apply to our relations with the world and with our past. Our freedom does not destroy our situation, but gears itself to it: as long as we are alive, our situation is open, which implies both that it calls up specially favoured modes of resolution, and also that it is powerless to bring one into being by itself.

We shall arrive at the same result by considering our relations with history. Taking myself in my absolute concreteness, as I am presented to myself in reflection, I find that I am an anonymous and prehuman flux, as yet unqualified as, for instance, "a working man" or "middle class." If I subsequently think of myself as a man among men, a bourgeois among bourgeois, this can be, it would seem, no more than a second order view of myself; I am never in my heart of hearts a worker or a bourgeois, but a consciousness which freely evaluates itself as a middle class or proletarian consciousness. And indeed, it is never the case that my objective position in the production process is sufficient to awaken class consciousness. There was exploitation long before there were revolutionaries. Nor is it always in periods of economic difficulty that the working class movement makes headway. Revolt is, then, not the outcome of objective conditions, but it is rather the decision taken by the worker to will revolution that makes a proletarian of him. The evaluation of the present operates through one's free project for the future. From which we might conclude that history by itself has no significance, but only that conferred upon it by our will. Yet here again we are slipping into the method of "the indispensable condition failing which . . .": in opposition to objective thought, which includes the subject in its deterministic system; we are setting idealist reflection which makes determinism dependent upon the constituting activity of the subject. Now, we have already seen that objective thought and analytical reflection are two aspects of the same mistake, two ways of overlooking the phenomena. Objective thought derives class-consciousness from the objective condition of the proletariat. Idealist reflection reduces the proletarian condition to the awareness of it, which the proletarian arrives at. The former traces class-consciousness to the class defined in terms of objective characteristics, the latter on the other hand reduces "being a workman" to the consciousness of being one. In each case we are in the realm of

abstraction, because we remain torn between the *in itself* and the *for itself*. If we approach the question afresh with the idea of discovering, not the causes of the act of becoming aware, for there is no cause which can act from outside upon a consciousness—nor the conditions of its possibility, for we need to know the conditions which actually produce it—but class-consciousness itself, if, in short, we apply a genuinely existential method, what do we find? I am not conscious of being working class or middle class simply because, as a matter of fact, I sell my labour or, equally as a matter of fact, because my interests are bound up with capitalism, nor do I become one or the other on the day on which I elect to view history in the light of the class struggle: what happens is that "I exist as working class" or "I exist as middle class" in the first place, and it is this mode of dealing with the world and society which provides both the motives for my revolutionary or conservative projects and my explicit judgements of the type: "I am working class" or "I am middle class," without its being possible to deduce the former from the latter, or vice versa. What makes me a proletarian is not the economic system or society considered as systems of impersonal forces, but these institutions as I carry them within me and experience them; nor is it an intellectual operation devoid of motive, but my way of being in the world within this institutional framework.

• • •

. . . class is a matter neither for observation nor decree; like the appointed order of the capitalistic system, like revolution, before being thought it is lived through as an obsessive presence, as possibility, enigma and myth. To make class-consciousness the outcome of a decision and a choice is to say that problems are solved on the day they are posed, that every question already contains the reply that it awaits; it is, in short, to revert to immanence and abandon the attempt to understand history. In reality, the intellectual project and the positing of ends are merely the bringing to completion of an existential project. It is I who give a direction, significance and future to my life, but that does not mean that these are concepts; they spring from my present and past and in particular from my mode of present and past co-existence. Even in the case of the intellectual who turns revolutionary, his decision does not arise *ex nihilo*; it may follow upon a prolonged period of solitude: the intellectual is in search of a doctrine which shall make great demands on him and cure him of

Philip Roth

(B. 1933)
AMERICAN (NEW JERSEY)



Roth was born in 1933 in Newark, New Jersey. His fiction frequently drew on Jewish culture and family life in New Jersey. He first drew attention in 1959 with a collection called *Goodbye, Columbus*. In 1969 Roth shocked and amused the world with *Portnoy's Complaint*. In the 1980s, he wrote the Zuckerman trilogy, and in 2000 *The Human Stain*. In all Roth's books, an obsession with personal identity serves as a philosophical leitmotif. He is the subject of a recent bio-flick by esteemed Berlin documentary film maker Christa Maerker.

❖ from *The Human Stain* ❖

"You think—if you ever want to know—is there a God? You want to know why am I in this world? What is it about? It's about this. It's about. You're here, and I'll do it for you. It's about not thinking you're someone else somewhere else. You're a woman and you're in bed with your husband, and you're not fucking for fucking, you're not fucking to come, you're fucking because you're in bed with your husband and it's the right thing to do. You're a man and you're with your wife and you're fucking her, but you're thinking you want to be

From The Human Stain by Philip Roth. Copyright 2000 by Houghton-Mifflin, Inc.

fucking the post office janitor. Okay—you know what? You're with the janitor."

He says softly, with a laugh, "And that proves the existence of God."

"If that doesn't, nothing does."

"Keep dancing," he says.

"When you're dead," she asks, "what does it matter if you didn't marry the right person?"

"It doesn't matter. It doesn't even matter when you're alive. Keep dancing."

"What is it, Coleman? What does matter?"

"This," he said.

"That's my boy," she replies. "Now you're learning."

"Is that what this is—you teaching me?"

"It's about time somebody did. Yes, I'm teaching you. But don't look at me now like I'm good for something other than this. Something more than this. Don't do that. Stay here with me. Don't go. Hold on to this. Don't think about anything else. Stay here with me. I'll do whatever you want. How many times have you had a woman really tell you that and mean it? I will do anything you want. Don't lose it. Don't take it somewhere else, Coleman. This is all we're here to do. Don't think it's about tomorrow. Close all the doors, before and after. All the social ways of thinking, shut 'em down. Everything the wonderful society is asking? The way we're set up socially? 'I should, I should, I should'? Fuck all that. What you're supposed to be, what you're supposed to do, all that, it just kills everything. I can keep dancing, if that's the deal. The secret little moment—if that's the whole deal. That slice you get. That slice out of time. It's no more than that, and I hope you know it."

"Keep dancing."