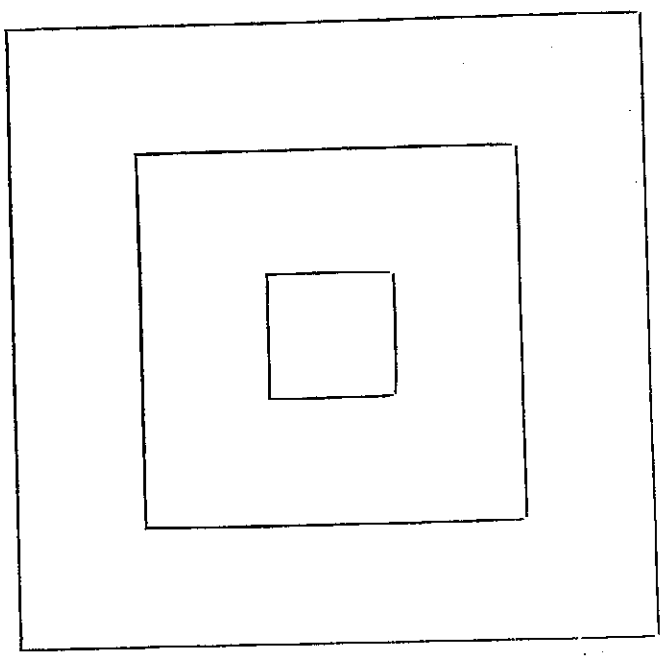
JEAN-PAUL SARTRE

Literary and Philosophical Essays

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY ANNETTE MICHELSON



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* Note: Camus' *The Outsider* was published in the U title of *The Stranger.*

Chapter 12

Cartesian Freedom

FREEDOM IS ONE and indivisible, but it manifests itself in a variety of ways, according to circumstances. The following question may be asked of all philosophers who set up as its defenders: in connection with what exceptional *situation* have you experienced your freedom? It is one thing to test your freedom in the realm of action, of social or political activity, or of artistic creation, and another thing to test it in the act of understanding and discovering. A Richelieu, a Vincent de Paul or a Corneille would, had they been metaphysicians, have had certain things to tell us about freedom because they grasped it by one end, at a moment when it manifested itself by an absolute event, by the appearance of something new, whether poem or institution, in a world that neither asked for it nor rejected it. Descartes, who was primarily a metaphysician, grasped things by the other end: his primary experience was not that of creative freedom "ex nihilo" but of autonomous thinking which discovers by its own power intelligible relationships among existing essences. That is why we Frenchmen, who have been living by Cartesian freedom for three centuries, understand implicitly by "free will" the practice of independent *thinking* rather than the production of a creative act, and our philosophers have finally come, like Alain, to identify freedom with the act of judging.

The fact is that the exhilaration of understanding always includes the joy of feeling ourselves responsible for the truths we discover. Regardless of who the teacher is, there always comes a moment when the pupil confronts the mathematical problem unaided. If he does not bring his mind to grasp the relationships, if he himself does not produce the conjectures and diagrams which are to be applied like cipher-stencils to the figure under consideration and which reveal the major features of its construction, if he does not finally acquire

...sive insight, the words remain dead signs; everything has been learned by rote. Thus, if I examine myself, I can feel that intellection is not the mechanical result of a pedagogic procedure, but rather that its origin lies solely in my deliberate willing, my application, my refusal to be distracted or diverted, in the undivided attention of my mind—to the radical exclusion of all external forces. And such indeed was Descartes' primary intuition. He was more fully aware than anyone else that the slightest act of thinking involves all thinking, an autonomous thinking that posits itself—in each of its acts—in its full and absolute independence.

But, as we have seen, this experience of *autonomy* does not coincide with that of *productivity*. The reason is that thought must obviously have *something* to understand, whether it be the objective relationships among essences and among structures, or the sequence of ideas, in short, a pre-established order of relationships. Thus, as a counterpart to freedom of intellection, nothing is more rigorous than the path that lies ahead: "As there is but one truth concerning each thing, whoever finds it knows all that can be known about it. For example, a child who has been taught arithmetic and who has done a sum in accordance with its rules can be certain that, as far as the sum which he examined is concerned, he has found all that the human mind can find. For the method which teaches how to follow the true order and to indicate exactly all the circumstances of what is sought, contains everything that gives certainty to the rules of arithmetic." [1]

Everything is stated: the object to be discovered and the method. The child who sets himself to doing a sum in accordance with the rules does not enrich the universe with a new truth. He merely repeats an operation that has been performed by a thousand others before him and that he will never be able to push beyond the same point they have reached. The attitude of the mathematician is therefore a rather striking paradox. His mind is like that of a man who walks on a very narrow path where each of his steps and the very posture of his body are rigorously conditioned by the

[1] *Discourse on Method*, Part II.

nature of the ground and the necessities of the walking, [illegible] who is nevertheless imbued with the unshakable conviction that he is performing all these acts freely. In short, if we start with mathematical intellection, how shall we reconcile the fixity and necessity of essences with freedom of judgment? The problem is particularly difficult owing to the fact that, in Descartes' time, the order of mathematical truths seemed to all right-thinking people the product of the divine will. And since this order could not be eluded, Spinoza preferred to sacrifice human subjectivity to it: he showed the true as developing and asserting itself by its own power *through* these incomplete individualities, these finite modes. Confronted with the order of essences, subjectivity can be only the simple freedom of adhering to the true (in the sense that, for certain moralists, we have no other *right* than to do our *duty*) or else it is only a jumbled thought, a mutilated truth, the development and elucidation of which dissipate its subjective character. In the second case, man disappears. There remains no difference between thought and truth. The true is the totality of the system of thoughts. If anyone wants to save man, the only thing to do, since he cannot *produce* any idea but only contemplate it, is to provide him with a simple negative power, that of saying *no* to whatever is not true. Thus, we find in Descartes, under the appearance of a unitary system, two rather different theories of freedom, according to whether he is considering this power of understanding and judging which is his or whether he simply wants to save the autonomy of man when confronted with the rigorous system of ideas.

His spontaneous reaction is to affirm the responsibility of man in the presence of the true. Truth is a human thing, since I must affirm it in order for it to exist. Before my *judgment*, which is an adherence of my will and a free commitment of my being, there exist only neutral and floating ideas which are neither true nor false. Man is thus the being through whom truth appears in the world. His task is to commit himself totally in order that the natural order of existants may become an order of truths. He must ponder the world, must will his thinking and must transform the order of being into

system of ideas. Ever since the *Meditations*, he has appeared the "ontico-ontological" being of whom Heidegger speaks. Descartes therefore begins by providing us with entire intellectual responsibility. At every moment, he experiences the freedom of his thought, and his solitude as well, in the face of the sequence of essences. As Heidegger has said, nobody can die for me. But Descartes had said earlier that nobody can understand for me. In the end, we must say yes or no and decide alone, for the entire universe, on what is true. This adherence is a metaphysical and absolute act. Commitment is not relative. It is not a matter of an approximation that can be called into question again. But just as Kant's moral man acts as a legislator for the community of ends, Descartes, as a scientist, decides as to the laws of the world. For this "yes," which must finally be uttered in order for the reign of the true to come into being, requires the commitment of an infinite power that is given in its entirety all at once. We cannot say a "partial" yes or a "partial" no. And man's "yes" is no different from God's. "Only the will do I perceive within me to be so great that I cannot conceive the idea of anything wider or more far-reaching, so that it is chiefly the will which enables me to know that I bear the image and likeness of God. For, though it is incomparably greater in God than in myself, either because of knowledge and power, which, being joined to it, make it more stable and more efficacious, or because of its object . . . nevertheless it does not seem to me greater, if I consider it strictly and precisely in itself."

It is evident that, precisely because this entire freedom is not a matter of degree, it belongs equally to every man. Or rather—for freedom is not a quality among other qualities—it is evident that every man *is* a freedom. And the famous assertion that common sense is the most common thing in the world does not mean only that every man has the same seeds in his mind and the same innate ideas, but also that "it bears witness to the fact that the power to judge soundly and to distinguish the true from the false is equal in all men."

A man cannot be more of a man than other men because freedom is similarly infinite in each individual. In this sense, no one has shown better than Descartes the connection be-

tween the spirit of science and the spirit of democracy, for universal suffrage cannot be founded on anything other than this universal faculty of saying yes or saying no. We can, no doubt, observe a wide difference among men. One man has a better memory, another a richer imagination, another understands things more quickly, another embraces a wider field of truth. But these qualities are not constitutive of the notion of man. They are to be regarded as corporeal accidents. The only thing that characterizes us as human creatures is the use that we freely make of these gifts. It makes no difference whether we have understood more or less quickly, since understanding, however it come, must be total for all or it does not exist. If Alcibiades and the slave understand the same truth, they are entirely alike in that they understand it. In like manner, the situation of a man and his powers cannot increase or limit his freedom. Descartes has here made, after the Stoics, an essential distinction between freedom and power. To be free is not to be able to do what one wants but to want what one can: "There is nothing that is entirely in our power, save our thoughts, at least if you use the word thinking, as I do, for all the operations of the soul, so that not only acts of meditation and of will, but even the functions of seeing, hearing, determining to perform one movement rather than another, etc. . . . , in so far as they depend upon it, are thoughts. . . . I did not mean thereby that external things are not at all in our power, but simply that they are so only in so far as they can follow from our thoughts, and not *absolutely* or *entirely*, because there are other powers outside us which can interfere with the results of our intentions." [2]

Thus, with a variable and limited power, man has total freedom. Here we perceive the negative aspect of freedom. For if I do not have power to perform such and such an action, I must abstain from desiring to perform it: "I must always try to conquer myself rather than fortune and to change my desires rather than the order of the world." In short, I must practise Επόχη in the moral realm. Nevertheless, the

[2] To M***, March 1638.

fact remains that freedom, in this primary conception, has a certain "efficacity." It is a positive and constructive freedom. It probably cannot change the quality of the movement that is in the world, but it can modify the direction of this movement. "The main seat of the soul is in the small gland which is in the middle of the brain, from which it radiates throughout the rest of the body by the agency of the [animal] spirits, the nerves and even the blood. . . . And the entire action of the soul consists in this, that merely by willing something, it makes the small gland to which it is closely joined move in the way requisite for producing the effect relating to this desire." [3]

It is this "efficacity," this constructiveness of human freedom that we find at the origin of the *Discourse on Method.* For the method is *invented:* "Certain paths," says Descartes, "have led me to considerations and maxims from which I have formed a method." [4] Better still, each rule of the Method (except the first) is a maxim of action or invention. Does not the analysis prescribed by the second rule call for a free and creative judgment which produces schemes and which conceives hypothetical divisions which it verifies shortly afterwards? And must not the order recommended in the third rule be sought and prefigured in the midst of disorder before we submit to it? The proof is that it will be invented if it does not actually exist: "Supposing even that there is order between [those objects] which do not naturally precede each other." And do not the listings of the fourth precept suppose a power of generalization and classification characteristic of the human spirit? In short, the rules of the Method are on the level of Kantian schematism. They represent, in sum, very general directives for free and creative judgment. Was not Descartes, at a time when Bacon was teaching the English to look to experience, the first to call upon the physicist to give precedence to hypothesis? We thus discover in his works a splendid humanistic affirmation of creative freedom, which constructs the true, piece by piece, which at every moment anticipates and prefigures the real relationships among es-

[3] *Treatise on the Passions of the Soul,* Articles 34 and 41.
[4] *Discourse on Method,* Part I.

sences by producing hypotheses and *schemata* which equal for God and for man, equal for all men, absolute and infinite, forces us to assume a fearful task, *our* task par excellence, namely, to cause a truth to exist in the world, to act so that the world is true—and which causes us to live with *generosity*, a "sentiment that each one has of his own free will and that is joined to the resolution never to be lacking in it."

But the established order intervenes at once. For a philosopher like Kant, the human mind constitutes the truth. For Descartes, it merely discovers it, since God has fixed for all time all the relationships which essences maintain among themselves. In addition, however the mathematician has chosen to handle his problem, he cannot doubt the result once it has been reached. The man of action who contemplates his enterprise can say, "This is mine." But not the scientist. As soon as the truth is discovered, it becomes foreign to him. It belongs to everyone and no one. He can merely recognize it, and, if he has a clear view of the relationships that constitute it, he cannot even doubt it. Transpierced by an inner illumination that animates his entire being, he can only give his adherence to the theorem that has been discovered and thereby to the order of the world. Hence, the judgments "two and two are four" and "I think, therefore I am" have value only inasmuch as I affirm them, but I cannot help but affirm them. If I say that I do not exist, I am not even shaping a fiction. I am assembling words whose meanings destroy each other, just as if I spoke of squared circles or three-sided cubes. Thus, the Cartesian will is forced to affirm. "For example, examining recently whether anything really existed in the world, and knowing that by virtue of the fact that I was examining the question, it very manifestly followed that I myself existed, I could not help but judge that a thing which I conceived clearly was true, not that I found myself forced to do so by any external cause, but only because the great light that was in my understanding was followed by a great inclination in my will." [5]

Descartes persists in using the word "free" to qualify this

[5] *Fourth Meditation.*

irresistible adherence to evidence, but he does so because he is here giving a quite different meaning to the word freedom. The adherence is free because it is not caused by the pressure of any constraint external to us, that is, it is not caused by a movement of the body or by a psychological impulsion. We are not in the realm of the passions of the soul. But if the *soul* remains independent of the body during the unfolding of the evidence *of the soul,* and if, in the terms of the definitions in the *Treatise on the Passions,* we may call the affirmation of relationships that are clearly and distinctly conceived an action of the thinking substance taken in its totality, these terms cease to have meaning if we consider the will in relation to the understanding. For we have called freedom the will's self-determined possibility of saying yes or no to ideas conceived by the understanding, which meant, in other terms, that the die had never been cast, that the future had never been foreseeable. Whereas at present, the relation of understanding to will, as concerns evidence, is conceived in the form of a rigorous law in which the clarity and distinctness of the idea play the role of determining factor in relation to the affirmation. In short, Descartes is here much closer to philosophers such as Spinoza and Leibnitz who define the freedom of a human being by the development of his essence, apart from any external action, though the moments of this development follow on each other's heels with rigorous necessity. It is at this point that he goes so far as to deny the freedom of indifference or rather so far as to make it the lowest degree of freedom: "In order for me to be free, it is not necessary that I be indifferent to choosing one of two alternatives, but rather, the more I incline toward one, whether because I know from evidence that the true and good meet there or because God thus disposes the inner working of my thinking, the more freely do I choose and embrace it." [6]

The second term of the alternative, "whether God thus disposes the inner working of my thinking," concerns faith in the strict sense of the term. In this domain, as the understanding cannot be the sufficient reason of the act of faith,

[6] *Fourth Meditation.*

the entire will is shot through and illuminated by an inner and supernatural light that is called grace. We may be shocked to see this autonomous and infinite freedom suddenly *affected* by divine grace and *disposed* to affirm what it does not see clearly. But, at bottom, is there a great difference between natural light and this supernatural light which is grace? In the second case, there can be no doubt that it is God Who affirms, through the intermediary of our will. But does not the same obtain in the first case? If ideas have being, they do so insofar as they come from God. Clarity and distinctness are only signs of the inner cohesion and the absolute density of being of the idea. And if I am irresistibly inclined to affirm the idea, it is exactly insofar as it weighs on me with all its being and all its absolute positiveness. It is this pure and dense being, flawless and entire, which affirms itself within me by its own weight. Thus, since God is the source of all being and all positivity, this positivity, this fullness of existence which is itself a true judgment, cannot have its source in me, who am nothing, but in Him. And let us not regard this theory merely as an effort to reconcile a rationalistic metaphysics with Christian theology. It expresses, in the vocabulary of the time, the consciousness that the scientist has always had of being a pure nothingness, a simple beholder in the face of the obstinate and eternal consistency, the infinite weight of the truth he contemplates.

Three years later, in 1644, Descartes did return to concede to us the freedom of indifference. "We are," he says, "so certain of the freedom and indifference that are within us that there is nothing we know more clearly. Consequently, the omnipotence of God should not prevent us from believing in them." [7] But this is a simple precaution. The tremendous success of the *Augustinus* had worried him, and he did not want to run the risk of being condemned by the Sorbonne. We must rather point out that this new conception of freedom without free will began to extend to all subjects on which he reflected. He wrote to Mersenne: "You reject what I have said, *that it is sufficient to judge correctly in order to act correctly;* and yet it seems to me that the common scholastic doctrine is *Voluntas non fertur in malum, nisi quatenus ei sub aliqua ratione boni repraesentatur ab intellectu,* whence the saying: *omnis peccans est ignorans;* with the result that if ever the understanding proposed to the will anything which was not a good thing, the will could not fail to make the proper choice." The thesis is now complete. The clear vision of the Good entails the act as the distinct vision of the True entails assent. For the Good and the True are one and the same thing, namely, Being. And if Descartes is able to say that we are never so free as when we do Good, it is in doing so that he substitutes a definition of freedom by the *value* of the act—the freest act being that which is the best, the one most in conformity with the universal order—for a definition by autonomy. And this is in accordance with the logic of his doctrine: if we do not invent *our* Good, if Good has an *a priori,* independent existence, how could we perceive it without doing it?

Nevertheless, we find in the quest for the True, just as we do in the pursuit of the Good, a veritable autonomy of man, but only insofar as he is a nothingness. It is as a nothingness and insofar as he is involved in Nothingness, Evil and Error that man escapes God. For God, Who is infinite fullness of being, can neither conceive nor govern nothingness. He has placed that which is positive within me. He is the author who is responsible for everything in me which is. But because of my finiteness and my limits, because of that side of me which is in shadow, I turn away from Him. If I retain freedom of indifference, I do so in relation to what I do not know or what I know imperfectly, in relation to fragmentary, mutilated and obscure ideas. I, who am a nothingness, can say *no* to all these nothingnesses. I am able *not* to decide to act or affirm. Since the order of truths exists outside of me, that which will define me as an autonomy is not creative invention but refusal. It is by refusing to the point of being unable to refuse any more that we are free. Thus, methodical doubt becomes the very model of the free act: *"Nihilominus . . . hanc in nobis libertatem esse experimur, ut semper ab iis credendis, quae non plane certa sunt et explorata possimus*

[7] *Principles,* Para. 41.

abstinere." And elsewhere he writes: *"Mens quae propria libertate utens supponit ea omnia non existere, de quarerum existentia vel minimum potest dubitare."*

This power of escaping, disengaging oneself and withdrawing is recognizable as a prefiguration of Hegelian negativity. Doubt strikes at all propositions which affirm something that is outside our thought, that is, I can place all existants between parentheses; I am exercising my freedom fully when I, who am myself a nothingness and a void, make of everything that exists a nothingness. Doubt is a breaking of contact with being. Through doubt, man has a permanent possibility of disentangling himself from the existing universe and of suddenly contemplating it from above as a pure succession of phantasms. In this sense, it is the most magnificent affirmation of the reign of the human. The hypothesis of the Evil Genius shows clearly that man can escape from all traps and illusions. There is an order of the true because man is free, and even if this order does not exist, it would be enough for man to be free for there never to be a reign of error, because man, who is a pure negation, a pure suspension of judgment, can, provided he remains motionless, like someone holding his breath, withdraw at any moment from a false and faked nature. He can even withdraw from everything within himself which is nature, from his memory, his imagination, his body. He can withdraw even from time and take refuge in the eternity of the moment. Nothing reveals more clearly the fact that man is not a being of "nature." But at the very moment that he attains this unequalled independence, against the omnipotence of the Evil Spirit, and even against God, he discovers that he is a pure nothingness. Confronted with the *being* that is placed, in its entirety, between parentheses, all that remains is a simple *no*, bodiless and without memories, without knowledge and without *anyone*.

It is this translucent refusal of everything that is achieved in the *cogito*, as the following passage testifies: *"Dubito ergo sum, vel, quod idem est; Cogito ergo sum."* [8] Although this

[8] *The Search After Truth.*

doctrine is patterned on the Stoic Επόχη, no one before Descartes had stressed the connection between free will and negativity. No one had shown that freedom does not come from man as he is, as a fullness of existence among other fullnesses in a world without lacunae, but rather from man as he *is not*, from man as a finite, limited being. However, this freedom can in no way be creative, since it is *nothing*. It has no power to produce ideas, for an idea is a reality, that is, it possesses a certain *being* that I cannot confer upon it. In addition, Descartes himself limited its scope, since, according to him, when being finally appears— absolute and perfect being, infinitely infinite—we cannot refuse it our adherence. We can thus see that he did not push his theory of negativity to the limit: "Since truth consists in *being* and falsehood in *non-being* only." [9] Man's power of refusal lies only in his refusing the false, in short, in saying no to nonbeing. If we are able to withhold our assent to the works of the Evil Spirit, it is not because they are true or false—they have at least, insofar as they *are* our conceptions, a minimum of being—but insofar as they are not, that is, insofar as they relate falsely to objects that do not exist. If we can withdraw from the world, it is not insofar as it exists in its full and high majesty, like an absolute affirmation, but insofar as it appears to us confusedly through the mediation of the senses and insofar as we ponder it imperfectly by means of a few ideas, the foundations of which escape us. Thus, Descartes constantly wavers between the identification of freedom with the negativity or negation of being—which would be the freedom of indifference—and the conception of free will as a simple negation of negation. In short, he failed to conceive negativity as productive.

A strange freedom. It ends by decomposing into two phases. In the first, it is negative and an autonomy, but confines itself to refusing our assent to error or confused thoughts. In the second, it changes meaning; it is a positive adherence, but the will then loses its autonomy, and the great clarity which exists in the understanding penetrates and determines the will.

[9] To Clerselin, April 23rd, 1649.

Is this what Descartes wanted, and does the theory he constructed really correspond to this proud and independent man's primary feeling about his free will? This does not seem to be the case. This individualist, whose very person plays such an important role in his philosophy, whether he is tracing the history of his thinking in the *Discourse on Method* or whether he is encountering himself, as an unshakable fact, on the path of his doubting, conceived a freedom that disembodied and deindividualized, for, if we are to believe him, the thinking subject is at first *nothing* but a pure negation, a nothingness, a slight trembling of air which alone escapes the act of doubting and which is *nothing other* than the doubt itself, and, when it emerges from this nothing, it does so in order to become a pure assumption of being.

There is not much difference between the Cartesian scientist, who is, in the last analysis, only the simple *vision* of eternal truths, and the Platonic philosopher, dead to his body and dead to his life, who has become only the contemplation of Forms and who ends by being identified with science itself. But *man,* in Descartes, had other ambitions. He conceived his life as an undertaking. He wanted science to be *made* and to be made by him; but his freedom did not allow him to "make" it. He wanted the passions to be cultivated, provided they were put to good use. He perceived, to a certain extent, the paradoxical truth that there are *free* passions. He prized true generosity above all things, defining it as follows: "I think that true generosity, which leads a man to esteem himself as highly as he can legitimately do so, consists only partly in his knowing that there is nothing that really belongs to him but the free disposing of his will nor any reason why he should be praised or blamed except for his using it well or badly, and partly in his feeling within him a firm and constant resolution to use it well, that is, never to lack the will to undertake and execute all things which he judges to be best: which is to follow virtue perfectly." [10] This freedom, which he invented and which can

[10] *Treatise on the Passions,* Para. 53.

only restrain desires until the clear vision of Good determines the resolutions of the will, cannot justify his proud feeling of being the veritable author of his acts and the continuous creator of free enterprises, any more than it gives him the means of inventing operative schemata in accordance with the general rules of the Method.

The reason is that Descartes, who was a dogmatic scientist and a good Christian, allowed himself to be crushed by the pre-established order of eternal truths and by the eternal system of values created by God. If man does not invent his God, if he does not construct Knowledge, he is only nominally free. Cartesian freedom here joins hands with Christian freedom, which is a false freedom. Cartesian man and Christian man are free for Evil, but not for Good, for Error, but not Truth. God takes them by the hand and, through the conjunction of natural and supernatural lights which He dispenses to them, leads them to the Knowledge and Virtue He has chosen for them. They need only let themselves be guided. The entire merit in this ascension reverts to Him. But insofar as they are nothingness, they escape Him. They are free to let go of His hand on the way and to plunge into the world of sin and non-being. *Per contra,* they can, of course, always beware of intellectual and moral Evil. They can beware and preserve themselves, can suspend judgment, can check their desires and stop their acts in time. In short, they are only asked not to hinder God's intentions. But Error and Evil are, in the last analysis, non-beings. Man has not even the freedom to produce anything in this domain. If he persists in his vice or his prejudices, what he creates will be a *nothing.* The universal order will not even be ruffled by his stubborness. "The worst," says Claudel, "is not always sure." In a doctrine that confuses being and perception, the only field of human initiative is the "bastard" terrain of which Plato speaks, the terrain that "is never seen except in dream," the borderline between being and non-being.

But since Descartes warns us that God's freedom is no more entire than that of man and that one is in the image of the other, we have a new means of investigation for de-

termining more exactly his personal exigences, exigences which philosophic postulates have not allowed him to satisfy. If he conceived divine freedom as being quite like his own freedom, then it is of his own freedom, such as he would have conceived it without the fetters of Catholicism and dogmatism, that he speaks when he describes the freedom of God. We have here an obvious phenomenon of sublimation and transposition. The God of Descartes is the freest of the gods that have been forged by human thought. He is the only creative God. He is subject neither to principles—not even to that of identity—nor to a sovereign Good of which He is only the executor. He had not only created existants in conformity with rules which have imposed themselves upon His will, but He has created both beings and their essences, the world and the laws of the world, individuals and first princples:

"The mathematical truths which you call eternal have been established by God and are entirely dependent upon Him, as are all other creatures. To say that these truths are independent of God is to speak of Him as one speaks of Jupiter or Saturn and to subject Him to the Styx and the fates . . . It is God Who has established these laws in nature, as a king establishes the laws of his kingdom . . ." [11] As for eternal truths, I repeat that they are indeed true or possible because God knows them as true or possible and that they are not, on the other hand, known as true by God as if they were true independently of Him. And if men quite understood the meaning of their words, they would never say without blasphemy that the truth of something precedes God's knowledge of it, for to God willing and knowing are one. With the result that by virtue of His willing a thing He knows it and by that very fact the thing is true. It should therefore not be said that if God did not exist, these truths would nevertheless be true." [12]

"You ask who obliged God to create these truths; and I say that He was as free not to make all the lines drawn from the centre to the circumference not equal as not to create the world. And it is certain that these truths are not more necessarily co-existent with His essence than other created things. . . ." [13] "And though God wished that some truths be necessary, this does not mean that He wished them necessarily, for it is one thing to wish them to be necessary and quite another thing to wish necessarily or to be the necessity of wishing." [14]

[11] Letter to Mersenne, April 15th, 1630.
[12] Letter to Mersenne, May 6th, 1630.

The meaning of the Cartesian doctrine is revealed here. Descartes realized perfectly that the concept of freedom involved necessarily an absolute autonomy, that a free act was an absolutely new production, the germ of which could not be contained in an earlier state of the world and that consequently freedom and creation were one and the same. The freedom of God, though similar to that of man, loses the negative aspect that it had in its human envelope; it is pure productivity; it is the extra-temporal and eternal act by which God brings into being a world, a Good and eternal truths. Thenceforth, the root of all Reason is to be sought in the depths of the free act. It is freedom which is the foundation of the true, and the rigorous necessity that appears in the order of truths is itself supported by the absolute contingency of a creative free will. This dogmatic rationalist might say with Goethe, not "in the beginning was the word," but "in the beginning was the act." As for the difficulty of maintaining freedom in the face of truth, he glimpsed a solution to it in conceiving a creation which is at the same time an act of intellection, as if the thing created by a free decree somehow encounters the freedom that sustains it in being and thereby yields to understanding. In God, willing and intuition are one and the same; the divine consciousness is both constitutive and contemplative. And, in like manner, God invented Good. He is not disposed by His perfection to decide what is the best; rather, that which He has decided is, as a result of His decision itself, absolutely Good. For Descartes, the divine prerogative is, in the last analysis, an absolute freedom which invents Reason and Good and which has no limits other than itself and its fidelity to itself. But, on the other hand, there is

[13] Letter to Mersenne, May 27th, 1630.
[14] Letter to Mesland, May 2nd, 1644.

nothing more in this freedom than in human freedom, and he is aware, in describing his God's free will, that he has merely developed the implicit content of the idea of freedom. If we examine the matter closely, we shall see that this is why human freedom is not limited by an order of freedoms and values which might offer themselves to our assent as eternal *things,* as necessary structures of being. It is the divine will that has laid down these values and truths and that supports them. Our freedom is limited only by the divine freedom. The world is only the creation of a freedom that preserves it for an indefinite time. Truth is nothing if it is not willed by this infinite and divine power and if it is not taken up, assumed and confirmed by human freedom. The free man is alone in the face of an absolutely free God. Freedom is the foundation of being, its secret dimension. Freedom, in this rigorous system, is the inner meaning and the true face of necessity.

Thus, in his description of divine freedom, Descartes ends by rejoining and explicating his primary intuition of his own freedom, of which he says that it is "known without proof and merely by our experience of it." It matters little to us that he was forced by the age in which he lived, as well as by his point of departure, to reduce the human free will to a merely negative power to deny itself until it finally yields and abandons itself to the divine solicitude. It matters little that he hypostasized in God the original and *constituent* freedom whose infinite existence he recognized by means of the *cogito* itself. The fact remains that a formidable power of divine and human affirmation runs through and supports his universe. It took two centuries of crisis—a crisis of Faith and a crisis of Science—for man to regain the creative freedom that Descartes placed in God, and for anyone finally to suspect the following truth, which is an essential basis of humanism: man is the being as a result of whose appearance a world exists. But we shall not reproach Descartes with having given to God that which reverts to us in our own right. Rather, we shall admire him for having, in a dictatorial age, laid the groundwork of democracy, for having followed to the very end the demands of the idea of *autonomy* and for having understood,

long before the Heidegger of *Vom Wesem des Grundes,* that the sole foundation of being is freedom.[15]

[15] Simone Pétremont takes me to task, in *Critique,* for having overlooked, in the present essay, "freedom against oneself." The fact is that she herself is unaware of the dialectic of freedom. To be sure, there is freedom against the *self.* But in order for it to be a "self" it must first be freedom. Otherwise, nature is only an externality, therefore a radical negation of the person. Even disarray, that is, the external imitation of externality, even *insanity,* presuppose freedom.