

## Goals and Spiritual Values of Existentialism

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The existentialist philosophy holds today an important, almost an overwhelming, place in our society. Moreover, the feeling is there that it is destined to exert in the near future an ever more profound influence on the thought and the conduct of the masses of our fellow-men, just as much as on philosophy, literature, or theology. Some rejoice in this, and others deplore it. In order to form an objective opinion on the subject, it is necessary to give it a close examination. We shall approach the problem first by trying to define the existentialist philosophy negatively, that is, by stating what it is not. Then we shall be able to state precisely its goals, and finally we shall touch on a few of its unquestionable spiritual values.

### **I. What Existentialist Philosophy Is Not**

To be able to judge existentialist philosophy at its true worth, at least five errors are to be avoided.

#### *1. Fashionable Existentialism, or the Eccentricities of our Time*

The first, the crudest and the most common error, consists of judging the philosophy simply according to appearances, according to certain worldly eccentricities which have no philosophical tie-in with authentic existentialism. In fact, it is easy to remember the fashion launched by a certain segment of student youth who haunted certain Parisian cafes and called themselves existentialists simply because they hung around Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. The existentialism in fashion was then the utmost absurdity of the century, and if it contributed to making known to the public the name of the latest philosophy it was truly most

detrimental to the existentialist philosophy itself. For, an existentialism adopted because it is the talk of the town can be nothing but a caricature of true existentialism.

## *2. Existentialist Literature, or the Triumph of Despair*

It would be no wiser to make a general evaluation of existentialism, as a philosophy, according to the literary tendency which claims this title. For when it left the society of the philosophers to launch out in the world governed by the novel, existentialist thought found itself deeply altered. Without denying the quality of some of these authors, we must still recognize that this literary tendency, by making anguish, absurdity, and nothingness into the warp and woof of existence, has only retained the purely negative facet of existentialist philosophy; and this is a generous statement. As for an over-all judgment of this literature, this is what a competent critic has to say:

On top of the tragic consciousness of our age has been proliferated a shadowy and obscene literature, in which psychological truth is systematically sought at the level of the beast, in which a lucid recognition of disorder has turned into a delectation of evil, despair into rage, sensual drunkenness into erotic madness, and often, disgust with life into obsession with suicide.[1]

Now, precisely nothing has done more to increase the prestige of what is believed to be existentialism than this outbreak of novels; nothing did more to assure its triumph than this literature of despair. Obviously it is not necessary to explain why we are not dealing with that type of existentialism in this essay.

## *3. The Existentialism of Sartre, or the Philosophy of the Absurd*

A third wide-spread error is that of generally evaluating existentialism according to our personal opinion of its individual representatives. And when existentialism is not judged

according to the eccentricities of fashion or literature, most people think immediately of Jean-Paul Sartre. He seems to be today's best representative of existentialism; first, because he went to the pains of presenting his thought in a system of doctrines; next, because he knew how to propagate his ideas outside of philosophical circles, using the most efficient propaganda methods: literary criticism, short stories, novels and the theater, and thus became the source of inspiration for the most popular literary tendencies. However, to be honest, we have to admit that except popularity and the tumult of the fashionable, authentic existentialism owes nothing to Jean-Paul Sartre. It is not in the least our intention to exclude Sartre from existentialism, "because the worldly wing of his influence is guilty of fraudulently claiming an identity." [2] But it is logical that the serious seeker be objectively put on his guard against the wide-spread tendency to almost automatically reduce the philosophy in question "to this mixture of existentialism and inexistentialism which makes up Sartrism." [3] Not only is the latter not a faithful expression of existentialist thought, but rather an outgrowth, or as Emmanuel Monnier put it so well, "the last shoot off one of the existentialist traditions, tradition which originated with Heidegger and which formed a radical opposition to the founders of the modern philosophy of existence." [4]

#### *4. Existentialist Philosophy or a New Way of Philosophizing*

A fourth error is often committed by those who condemn existentialism, be it rightly or wrongly. We may welcome it or deplore it, but we cannot deny that this philosophy represents the most modern literary, philosophical, and theological mode of thinking, and is at the same time the most authentic, realistic, and occasionally the cruelest expression of the age in which we are living. Trying to ignore this fact is one of the most serious errors that can come from one who is trying precisely to obtain a hearing from the men of this century. Speaking the language of his contemporaries, using the vocabulary of the people of his time, providing answers for the philosophical pre-occupations of his century: these are some of the

characteristics of the preaching of the great apostle Paul. But here we have more than a question of method. A deeper study of existentialism is all the more necessary, since its origins are to be found in Christian thought and since, in certain cases, its representatives claim to be Christianity's most faithful witnesses.

##### *5. Existentialism or Another Way of Talking Christianity*

A deplorable confusion exists precisely between existentialism and Christian thought that we must do our best not to foster. The more one is capable of rightly evaluating how much contemporary theological thought owes to existentialism, the more this error is easy to commit. However, it would be a serious misunderstanding not to see that the identity is essentially valid vis-a-vis the form of thought and that there is often a radical distinction in the fundamental meaning. No one doubts the Christian origins of existentialism, and Kierkegaard was perfectly right in presenting Christian truth as the model of existential truth. But is this sufficient reason to conclude that existentialism is just another way of talking Christianity?

This was certainly the first intention of the father of existentialism. We know to what pains Kierkegaard went in trying to re-establish the spirit of authentic Christianity. For he felt that, under the influence of the great Protestant philosophers such as Kant and Hegel, the spirit of the Reformation had been covered over by the rationalist tendency which was sweeping current philosophical and theological thought in its train. Desirous to follow up the work of Luther, Kierkegaard reacted against this alteration of the spirit of the Reformation and by returning to the original thought of Christianity, he hoped to wave the banner for a new Reformation.

But alas, existentialism is not limited to Soren Kierkegaard's thought, neither to the purely Christian expression of his thought. Other branches have sprouted out of the common trunk, and even if we held to the branch fed by Christian sap, we would still have to admit that it has not brought forth Christians who are assured and calm in their doctrinal edifice. If Christian

existentialism were the authentic expression of Christian thought, would it have such a peculiarly Protestant color with Kierkegaard, Catholic with Gabriel Merce, Orthodox with Berdyaev and Jewish with Buber?

We have said enough, we feel, about the necessity of an infinite amount of caution in order to have an objective evaluation of existentialist philosophy. It would be unjust to make a decision based on appearances, or to judge it only on its negative side exploited by one brand of literature. It would be just as sorry to foster prejudices against it based on a particular case, or to condemn the entire system en masse without even taking the trouble to examine it beforehand. But the most subtle error, as far as we can see, would be not to discern the limits between existentialist thought and Christian thought with the pretext that the former originated in the latter, or simply because throughout all the variations of existentialist thought, an eminently Christian form of thought is to be found.

## **II. Goals of Existentialism**

As precarious as the connection between the different existentialist traditions may be, nevertheless they have in common a certain manner of stating problems, a certain sound in the subjects they choose, a certain seeking after common goals which permit us to speak of them from a global point of view.

### *1. Man as an Individual*

And thus, in very general terms, we can characterize existentialist philosophy-

*as a reaction of the philosophy of man against the excesses of the philosophy of ideas or of the philosophy of things.* In it, it is not so much existence in all its extension, but rather the existence of man which is the first problem of philosophy. It accuses traditional philosophy of

having too often misappreciated it, to turn to the philosophy of the world or of the products of the mind.[5]

Modern philosophy had been a humanism, that is a philosophy of man, but of man in a general way, man as a being gifted with reason. Rather than man, it had considered human reason. Now, the worth of the existentialist philosophers was precisely to remind humanism of the existence of man. Over against Hegel's rationalism, over against the idea that the object of philosophy is reason in its universality, Kierkegaard was the first to oppose what he himself called the existential philosophy, that is, a philosophy which considers above all the individual, the human individual in his tangible life, not the knowing individual, the thinking subject, but the existing individual, with his suffering, his anguish and his passion. For to exist, as he says, is above all being an individual. What is essential, is not therefore a general principle, universal Reason, Humanity or Man with a capital, or even human nature in that which it has in common with all individuals, but the tangible man, the human individual. For this reason, Berdyaev was able to assert:

Existentialist philosophy is a personalistic philosophy: the subject of knowledge is the human person.[6]

## *2. Priority of Existence*

But if it is first of all a reversion to man and even to the tangible man, existentialism is more than just that. What is interesting in man, what forms the foremost object of its research, is existence. From its very beginnings, existentialism has been characterized by its tendency to accentuate that which exists, or even better, the existence of that which exists. It is not the individual's being which must be attained, but rather his existence. Only this existence provides the true being. Every subject is first an existing subject. The existence is what actualizes man's essence. Our words prove this. When we say, "I am a man," "I am" asserts

the existence; "man" designates the essence. In man, therefore, existence precedes essence and this assertion, with its variations makes up the fundamental thesis of all the existentialists.

Before the arrival of existentialism, philosophy had always judged that the essence of a thing was anterior to its existence. Thus it was taught that the individual man was derived from the concept of man, which is found in divine intelligence, or which simply makes up human nature, of which every man is an example. But once again existentialism upsets the relation established by philosophy between essence and existence. There is at least one being whose existence precedes his essence, one being who exists before being able to be defined by any concept: This being is man. Man exists first of all, he appears in the world, and only hereafter can he be defined. Man is first of all nothing; he will only be after being nothing, and he will be what he has made of himself. This is the basic principle of the new philosophy.

### *3. Existence is in Interiority*

But what must we understand by "existence?" The answer is not easy, for unless we seize man existing, existence will always be a pure abstraction. In the existentialist vocabulary, *to exist* is not a synonym of *to be*. *To be* designates a state, whereas *to exist* designates an act. Existence is the very act by which the passage from possibility to reality is accomplished. Now, it is only man who can carry out this act, because he alone, in the world of our experience, is free, and also because he alone is a conscious subject. Nature *is*, but *does not exist* outside of the mental act of the subject who thinks it and makes it exist. By seizing himself in the consciousness of self, the subject seizes himself existing, he seizes his own existence. That is why every subject is an existing subject; existence is the subject himself in his interiority. For the existentialist philosophers, the only true objectivity is therefore that of his own subjectivity, because it is in the depths of himself, in his interiority, that he discovers the only true reality, existence. To exist is his first worry, existence his supreme interest.

#### *4. Man and His Becoming*

Existence is therefore made up of interiority; it is the act by which the subject makes himself and forms his own essence. However, this act presupposes liberty. Only he who freely chooses himself exists authentically; only he who makes himself according to the image of the person he wants to be. And thus choice is never once-and-for-all: one cannot anchor himself in existence as in a position that has been acquired once and for all. He who is existing and who stabilizes himself in the type of what he wanted to become transforms himself into an object and by that very act stops existing. Now, existence is what never becomes an object. We can only speak of it in terms of springing forth. It is the original appearance whereupon the subject thinks and acts. In short, existence is man in his becoming, in his incessant effort to outdo what he is. Consequently, existentialism puts on man's shoulders not only the entire responsibility for what he is, since he is what he makes of himself, but also for his own destiny.

#### *5. The Dramatic Conception of Man's Destiny*

This responsibility explains, on the one hand, the importance accorded to the problem of liberty by all the existentialist philosophers, as well as explaining, on the other hand, the singularly dramatic conception of human existence which characterizes them all. In fact, with the very vivid feeling that he has of making himself, the existentialist thinker cannot stay at the level of abstract and theoretical speculation: he lives his thought, it is the latter which engages him directly, he can only take upon himself the different situations of his existence. An example: Socrates whom Kierkegaard makes into the model of the existential thinker. He had come to the conclusion of immortality by one proviso, but in this proviso he engages his life, by assuming death in all liberty. This is authentically living. But out of this obligation of life flows, for different reasons, the anguish which is so characteristic of all the existentialists

as well as their basically tragic understanding of the destiny of man.

That is, briefly, what the representatives of existential philosophy have in common. It is true that concerning every one of the several points of this common objective, the opinions are infinitely varied. We cannot go over every one of the different aspects to try to pick out one here, one there. Our judgment can only be general and touch on the form of thought which all the existentialist philosophers have in common, rather than on their completely different systems. Moreover, the essential worth of existentialism for us is to be found in this general judgment.

### **III. Spiritual Values of Existentialism**

We cannot here discuss the value of existentialism as a whole, nor even take up some of the most justified criticisms which are commonly made concerning it. No one particular system can be accepted without reservations, and some of them-and this includes the most widely known, those of Heidegger and Sartre-are affected with a basic fault. These are, however, at the bottom of existential thought, truths of capital importance which come straight from Christianity. One of the merits of existentialist philosophers is precisely to have brought them to the forefront, and by doing this, to have brought contemporary theology to a better understanding of Biblical thought, particularly in the area of Christian anthropology.

#### *1. The Knowledge of Man as an Individual*

And thus the first value of existentialism for us is found in the very object of its greatest study and in the way this study was carried out: man, man as a tangible being, the existing individual, human personality. The Bible knows no other than this. In it there is no knowledge of man as such. The sacred writers were totally ignorant of an abstract, theoretical knowledge of human nature, the product of philosophical speculations. Their representation of man is breath-takingly realistic, and it is always the outline of the real life of types of men whose

names we know. This is such an essential truth that the ideal image, the perfect stature of man, is incarnated in the life of Jesus Christ, which means that the definition of the conception of man, according to the Bible, can only be based on the living reality of existing individuals.

Existentialist philosophy has shown a remarkable acumen in exploiting for its own use this fundamental Bible truth. And thus it presents to us a representation of man radically different from that to which classical philosophy, and in turn all of Christian theology, had accustomed us. By this observation of men, the existentialist philosophers led us to an anthropology remarkably akin to that of the Bible and which as well is harmonious with a realistic observation of the facts. We esteem this result to be the first great merit of existentialism.

## *2. Biblical Thought Basically Existential*

The pre-eminence of existence is without the shadow of a doubt another Biblical notion enhanced by existentialist philosophy. It is asserted in the Bible's first mention of man, when the author of Genesis defines man as "a living soul." The drama of man, of which the Bible is full from *Genesis to Revelation*, is nothing less than an existential drama. Everything, absolutely everything, boils down to a problem of existence. God himself gives his own definition as the Existing One *par excellence*: The Eternal One. He calls himself "I am Who I am." In opposition with idols he is also named "the living God." The incarnation of the Word is, in the highest degree, a demonstration of the existential basis of Christianity. For the salvation of man, it was made "life-giving spirit." Not only does Christ present himself as "the living One," "the Prince of life," but as being life itself.

The existential characteristic is also found in Biblical truth. It resembles not in the least the abstract speculation of philosophy or even of traditional theology. Biblical truth only makes sense to the extent in which it is lived. Christ himself gave the example: "What He

taught, He lived. . . . Thus in His life, Christ's words had perfect illustration and support. And more than this, what He taught, He was. . . . Not only did He teach the truth, but He was the Truth" (Ed. 78, 79). The same principle is valid for his disciples: "Only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven," says Jesus, can claim his name. Only those who listen to the truth and practice it are his authentic brothers and sisters. In his hymn on charity, Paul contrasts the uselessness of theoretic knowledge with the only real value of practical knowledge. Truth is really known only when it becomes inner life.

And there we have another existentialist merit, that of having grasped the existential basis of Christian truth, truth that is communicated more by testimony than by reason. Kierkegaard, especially, considered Christian truth to be the type of existential truth. For him, the "how" one adheres to truth seemed less important than the "what" is received as truth. He felt that truth known or memorized is nothing more than a cadaver-an object without value. The importance lies not so much in the truth as in the attitude of the knower. Without the inner attitude, the knowledge is vain, it trickles away into the simple act of knowing. He even says, "It is not truth which is truth, but it is the path which is the truth, that is, truth is only in the becoming, in the process of appropriation." [7]

### *3. The Notion of Becoming*

The notion of becoming is another Biblical value forcefully affirmed by existentialist philosophy. It is no secret how this problem of the Christian becoming occupied the last years of the life of Kierkegaard. It was in the name of this principle that he denounced as the most formidable illusion of modern time the idea that Christianity is the same thing as Christendom, that all the inhabitants of a country are Christians because of the sole fact that they have been baptized, and that they do not need to become Christians. In the name of the same principle, he also spoke out against the ultra-conservativeness of the established Church, of the official, national Church, coinciding with the State. To the contrary, the true Church is

a Church that is becoming, he says, just as each one of her members must be.

Do we need to demonstrate how right these assertions are or to emphasize how well they reflect one of the dominant characteristics of the Biblical concept of man?[8] The creation story marks conspicuously the privilege accorded to the human creature- ". . . and man *became* a living soul." This expression indicates clearly that man does not exist as does an object, that he is not a given substance of being, but rather a soul whose existence depends at every moment on the activity through which he makes himself, a soul who not only has life, but is himself living. In other words, man did not come from his Creator's hands a finished being, possessing from the beginning an acquired character, a well determined personality, in a word, an immortal essence. The perfection of man did not lie in a finishing, a fullness accorded from the beginning by the Creator, but rather in the possibility of an infinite development, that eternity itself cannot exhaust. To realize his being, to make himself, as it were, to become a being in the likeness of God, this is the privilege of man as well as the special grace of the Creator. For in creating him, God gave man the possibilities necessary to attain all the fullness to which he was destined, provided that the free creature consent and cooperate in the realization of God's plan for him.

The trial of the Garden of Eden must be considered in this light, as well as the pilgrimage of God's children since the fall, the sanctification of Jesus for those who obey and the never-finished perfecting of those who want to be like Him. God has accorded to man the grace of becoming what he has resolved to be. By consenting to the plan of God and his cooperation with divine power, man has the possibility of creating himself as that which he wants to be, to work toward his transformation according to the representation which he makes of his model, by participating in the very life of his creator.

This idea of the progressive becoming of man, that of the Christian included, this idea of a maturation, of a necessary development and of a transformation foreseen by God in the primitive economy, so that man might attain adulthood, his fullness, his form as son of God,

stands out just as clearly in the over-all Biblical conception of time and history. The process of gradual revelation, just as the progressive realization of the plan of salvation, confirms this law of becoming for everything that touches man's being. Christian ethics is founded on this principle; it is the highest form of open-end ethics. It fixes no arrival, no leveling-off for the Christian; far from stopping, in his forward march, every progress becomes a means of going higher, of ever coming closer to the ideal. The Christian can never be content with what he is since he is told to be perfect as his heavenly Father is perfect.

#### *4. Existentialist Realism and its Theological Meaning*

To be complete, only as far as anthropology is concerned, we must add a few lines concerning the particularly dramatic conception of the destiny of man found in the writings of existentialist philosophers, conception which is not entirely foreign to the Biblical notion of man, a mortal creature, drawn from nothingness, threatened with returning there at every step, and even more, loaded down with an original fault which makes death inevitable. No philosophy has ever grasped with more reality this natural fragility of man, the reasons for his deep-seated anguish and tragic feeling about life, faced with death and nothingness. There is no trouble understanding how the existentialist thinkers of the atheistic branch could do nothing better than launch out into nothing, to be faithful to nothingness, to joyfully embrace death or absurdity and to consider that "the history of any life is the history of a failure." [9]

However that may be, even this negative aspect of existentialism contains something interesting for the knowledge of the individual man. All this human reality made up of misery, anguish, contradiction, vanities, that the existentialist authors have taken so much time to write out so loyally and so precisely, sometimes even brutally and cynically, illustrates perfectly what the Bible tells us about the natural man, separated from God and in revolt against Him. The consciousness of this tragic situation of natural man, abandoned to his own forces and impotent because he is "sold unto sin," led Paul to exclaim in a strangely

existentialist cry, "O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" However, the apostle does not stop with the anguished cry of the writers of despair; on the contrary, he knows the remedy, and he hastens to give it. "I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Rom. 7:14-25).

##### *5. The Existence of God and His Relations with Man*

This reference to God, and to the God of Jesus Christ, leads us naturally to the greatest value, on which all the others depend: the existence of God and his relations with man. On this most important point, it is true enough, the existentialist thinkers have a radically divergent attitude. And here, for each one of them, the test of authenticity is situated. The question of God provides the distinctive mark of the different existentialist systems: those which are truly faithful to existential thought and those which betray it.

The radical opposition between existentialism and classical philosophy which was based on reason and abstract theories, has been abundantly emphasized. It would be just as correct to say that the new philosophy has contradicted traditional theology, a close imitation of classical philosophy. For just as it had lost man, the human individual, from sight, modern humanism had also lost from sight the connecting line between God and man. And it was precisely the reaction of Kierkegaard which marked out both a return to individual man and a return to the God of the Christian revelation in whom man possesses the eternal source of his existence.

In fact, for Kierkegaard, Christianity supposes not only the existence of man but also the existence of God. The object of Christian faith, he says, is the existence of God. But here again, as with man, it cannot be a question of an abstract God, of the god of philosophical speculation. It is vainly that the latter claims to grasp and demonstrate the existence of God. The demonstration can never, moreover, touch on the existence itself. It is impossible to really demonstrate that something exists. Nothing is more improper than trying to demonstrate the

existence of someone who exists. Thus, for him, the efforts of speculative thought to demonstrate the existence of God are nothing better than a mockery of God himself. And therefore Christianity rests, according to Kierkegaard, beyond all the rational proofs of the existence of God. Of course God is everywhere in creation, but he is not there directly visible. It is only by descending into himself, into his own inner abyss, that the individual is prepared to see God. "God discernible in the heart," as Pascal said, this is the reality of God according to Christian existentialism. Even more, the fact that God has existed as an individual man, born into time, makes Christianity to the highest degree a "message of existence," an "existential message."

It is true that in this major point, existentialism, with Heidegger and Sartre, has not stayed in the line that its founder had pointed out. Because of the overwhelming position accorded to the thought of these philosophers, existentialism is affected with a fundamental fault. By wanting to again consider man as depending on no one but himself and by cutting him off from his relations with God, who according to Sartre, does not even exist, these thinkers have simply betrayed the intentions of the new philosophy. With them existentialism, which was born as a vigorous reaction against modern humanism, has gone back to humanism and thus risks being swallowed up by this great rationalistic current of modern thought. Everything depends on the final solution which will win out concerning the great question of the existence of God and his relations with man.

If it escapes this grotesquerie of spiritual poverty where some seem to be pushing it, if it rediscovers without playing on words the fullness of existence, existentialism can renew the face and the spirit of occidental rationalism.[10]

Otherwise, it will simply be necessary to keep from taking as the classical conception of life the caricature that the atheistic existentialists propose.

But alas, we cannot help fearing that the tendencies of atheistic existentialism are winning

out more and more, and that, finally, the term may only designate the eccentricities of our age, the literature of despair, the philosophy of the absurd, and even the theology of a post-Christianity without God. In this case, existentialism will truly be, as has already been asserted, the clearest expression "of the doctrinal collapse which characterizes our era," or else "the consciousness of a lack" which authentic Christianity will be all the better qualified to satisfy because it is not a stranger to the mode of thinking which favors such an understanding. The gospel message could then well be, for a society which has kept only the negative aspect of existentialist philosophy, what a well applied remedy can be for an illness which is dangerous but has been clearly diagnosed.

Whatever the future may have in store for existentialist philosophy, it is nonetheless impossible to deny the Christian nature of its original reaction, which betokens, as E. Mounier has said, "a return of religion in a world which has tried to find its meaning in what is purely manifest. Christian existentialism is an obvious defense against the secularization of faith. A sort of prophetic awakening on a philosophical plane." And it is not totally lacking in interest for us to notice that the beginning of this awakening is situated exactly in 1843, the year of the publication of the first protest from the founder of existentialism. It would therefore be unjust not to recognize the very real value of the goals striven for by the existentialist thinkers as well as the spiritual values of several of the Christian truths on which this philosophy has been founded. To be perfectly honest, we must even add that contemporary theology owes a debt to existentialism for several of its most essential discoveries, especially in the domain of Biblical anthropology.

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- [1] P.H. Simon, *l'Homme en Proces*, p. 21, Paris, 1965.
- [2] E. Mounier, *Introduction aus Existentialismes*, p.8.
- [3] Ibid.
- [4] Ibid.
- [5] Ibid., p.9.
- [6] N. Berdiaef, *Clnq Meditations sur l'Existence*, Editions Montaigne, p. 74.
- [7] S. Kierkegaard, *Post-Scriptum*, p. 50.
- [8] We studied this notion of the Christian becoming in *Christian Perfection According to the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy*, Paris, 1965. It is particularly discernible in the writings of Mrs. E. G. White.
- [9] J.P. Sartre, *L'Etre et le Neant*, p. 631, Paris, Gallimard, 1943.
- [10] E. Mounier, p. 189.
- [11] Ibid., p. 189, emphasis ours.