CHAPTER 19

THE HUMANISM DEBATE

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The 'Humanism Debate' was an extended critical discussion of the relationship between ethical values and human nature. The most famous exchange in this debate was that between Sartre and Heidegger. On one side Sartre proclaimed in his 1945 lecture (Sartre 1946) that 'Existentialism is a Humanism'; on the other side Heidegger responded in his 1946 'Letter on Humanism' (Heidegger 1947) that it was necessary to 'speak against humanism'. But the debate was not confined to Sartre and Heidegger: its participants included many of the leading French and German philosophers of the twentieth century, too many to discuss here. As well as Sartre and Heidegger I shall discuss the contributions of Lukács, Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, and Derrida.

§1 'Humanism'

Before looking at the details and ramifications of this debate it is worth saying a bit about the term 'humanism'. It is often said that this term (or rather *Humanismus*) was first introduced by the German educator F. F. Niethammer

in 1808 to defend the study of Latin and Greek in schools; and Heidegger alludes to this position when he remarks that 'a *studium humanitatis*, which in a certain way reaches back to the ancients and thus also becomes a revival of Greek civilization, always adheres to historically understood humanism' (Heidegger 1947: 244). Those who make this connection with the ancient world invoke the 'humanists' of the Renaissance, such as Erasmus, who sought to revive the study of the values of the ancient world and the conception there of *homo humanus* who exemplified these values; and it is certainly from this study of the writings of the ancient world (the *literae humaniores*) that we get our conception of 'humane studies' or 'humanities'. But once one looks at historical dictionaries this classicist origin for the use of the term 'humanism' is called into question. For the term '*humanisme*' can be found in French from 1765 with the meaning 'love of humanity' (philanthropy), and use of the term at this time does not appear to bring with it any specifically classical allusion. Subsequently Comte's development of his 'religion of humanity' in the 1850s was especially influential as a form of 'humanism', and around this time the term is increasingly used in French and English to describe positions which emphasize the intrinsic value of humanity. Contemporary 'humanist' associations have their origins in the influence of Comte's work (the British 'Humanistic Religious Association' was founded in 1853). It is clear, too, that the 'humanism' of Sartre's lecture is to be understood in terms of this Comtean tradition, even though Sartre explicitly distances himself from Comte's 'religion of humanity'.

§2 Sartre, 'Existentialism is a Humanism'[1]

Sartre delivered this lecture in Paris in 1945, just after the end of the Second World War, and it was subsequently published in 1946. Although the lecture is not definitive of his philosophy, it is rightly renowned as a classic presentation and defence by Sartre of his existentialism, and it expresses his position at a particularly significant time, soon after he had completed his first major work of philosophy, *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre 1943) which was published

[1] It needs to be emphasized that in his title Sartre asserts that existentialism is a form of humanism; this positive claim is lost in the common (mis)translation of the title as 'Existentialism and Humanism'.

during the occupation of France, and before he had begun the engagement with Marxism which dominated his thought from the 1950s until the end of his life. As we shall see, however, it is a delicate matter to work out quite how the lecture, and, in particular, Sartre's espousal here of 'humanism', should be situated alongside his other works, both earlier and later.

Sartre begins the lecture by announcing that it is his purpose to defend existentialism against its critics: those Catholic critics who accuse it of offering nothing but a nihilistic counsel of despair and equally those communist critics who maintain that it provides no basis for affirming the solidarity of mankind. Against such critics, Sartre maintains that 'existentialism is a humanism' in the sense that it is a doctrine that renders human life possible (Sartre 1946: 24), and he ends the lecture precisely by affirming his 'existential humanism':

> This is humanism, because we remind man that there is no legislator but himself; that he himself, thus abandoned, must decide for himself; also because we show that it is not by turning back upon himself, but always by seeking, beyond himself, an aim which is one of liberation, of some particular realisation, that man will realise himself precisely as human. (Sartre 1946: 56)

It is not obvious what Sartre has in mind here. But the message of the lecture as a whole is that we realize our humanity by creatively projecting ourselves beyond established expectations and ways of life to new goals through 'experiments in living' (to borrow J. S. Mill's phrase) in which we explore new ways of being human.

We can get an initial understanding of Sartre's position from his philosophical novel *Nausea*, written in the 1930s. Sartre here begins by expressing the familiar disgust of French intellectuals at bourgeois life: the hero, Roquentin, is increasingly nauseated by his own alienated life as an unsuccessful historian and by that of the ordinary citizens whose meaningless lives are mercilessly described in grubby detail. But the tone of the book changes as Roquentin's nausea projects him into a state of metaphysical ecstasy in which familiar categories melt away and things float free from their names; and as the ecstasy fades he returns to the world as a new man, with a new hope that he will be able to justify his existence by creating a work of art—something 'beautiful and hard as steel' which 'would make people ashamed of their existence' (Sartre 1938: 252). We find here a structure that becomes increasingly familiar in Sartre's work: on the one hand there is a relentless critique of misconceptions that he takes to be characteristic of ordinary life; but, on the other hand,

he offers the possibility of a different, better, life. In *Nausea*, it is art that is presented as offering this possibility, though Sartre's description of this clearly has an element of irony: is the reader really intended to suppose that Sartre, who is all too clearly the man behind Roquentin's mask, has managed to 'justify' his own existence by writing *Nausea*? But perhaps this element of irony is just the point. In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre remarks that 'Play (*Jeu*), like Kierkegaard's irony, releases subjectivity' (Sartre 1943: 580), namely the subjectivity of a subject who recognizes his own freedom and rejects the 'spirit of seriousness' that is characteristic of bourgeois values.

One of the aspects of bourgeois life of which Sartre expresses his contempt in *Nausea* is the Comtean humanism that was characteristic of French culture of the 1930s. Here is a small part of Roquentin's (Sartre's) scornful diatribe against the whole tribe of humanists:

> the humanist philosopher who bends over his brothers like an elder brother who is conscious of his responsibilities; the humanist who loves men as they are, the one who loves them as they ought to be, the one who wants to save them with their consent, and the one who will save them in spite of themselves, . . . the one who loves man for his death, the one who loves man for his life, the happy humanist who always knows what to say to make people laugh, the gloomy humanist whom you usually meet at wakes. They all hate one another: as individuals, of course, not as men. (Sartre 1938: 169)

Sartre alludes to this passage in his later lecture (Sartre 1946: 54). The mark of that kind of bad humanism, he claims, is that it 'upholds man as the end-in-himself and as the supreme value', and he contrasts it with his own existential humanism which holds that 'Man is all the time outside of himself: it is in projecting and losing himself beyond himself that he makes man to exist' (Sartre 1946: 54–5). The contrast is not drawn here as clearly as one would like, but it is something like this: the bad form of humanism holds that intrinsic value resides in certain human abilities or dispositions whose value can be identified in the context of a theory of human nature that is thought of as definitive. But, for Sartre, there cannot be any such definitive theory or account of human nature; for it is only through projects in which one makes oneself open to new possibilities that one achieves anything worthwhile and thereby 'makes man to exist', as he puts it. So although there is the possibility of a worthwhile life in which one realizes one's 'human' potential for self-creation ('There is this in common between art and morality, that in both we have to do with creation and invention'—Sartre 1946: 49), this kind of strenuous humanism is very different from the complacent celebration of human sensitivity or achievement that Sartre repudiates. One might still

object that the contrast here is not as deep as Sartre presents it, in that what seems to be distinctive of Sartrean humanism is just that intrinsic value resides in the capacity for free self-creation unlike the capacities such as compassion or scientific understanding celebrated by other humanists. But Sartre will respond that this way of expressing his position misrepresents it, and this issue will be better understood when placed in the context of the philosophy developed in *Being and Nothingness*.

The central theme of Sartre's phenomenological ontology in *Being and Nothingness* is the relationship between consciousness and its objects. Consciousness is 'non-substantial', a 'pure appearance' which exists only to the degree to which it appears to itself (Sartre 1943: xxxii). As appearance, however, it is always the appearance of something other than itself, its 'object', which appears as something substantial, something which has 'being'. Thus, to reverse the book's title, the relationship between consciousness and its objects is a relationship between 'Nothingness and Being'. Sartre's account of this relationship builds on the claim that 'our being is immediately "in situation" ' (Sartre 1943: 39); the objects of consciousness always appear in the light of our way of making sense of them as aspects of a situation or 'world' which is the way in which we choose to make sense of ourselves. Hence the relationship between consciousness and its objects is always a relationship between a self and its world (Sartre 1943: 104). Roquentin's ecstatic experience of things floating free from their names was, therefore, the fantasy of a consciousness which has lost its 'selfness' and thus its world. According to Sartre, this 'self' is chosen through 'an original projection of myself which stands as my choice of myself in the world' (Sartre 1943: 39); but the fact that we create ourselves by such a choice is normally hidden from us. Because our immediate, unreflective, consciousness is the appearance of things within a world, we normally think of ourselves by reference to the world which is in this way apparent to us. Hence we think of ourselves as objects within the world, albeit objects of a special kind that can initiate changes in it, but which are nonetheless subject to causal influences from it. For Sartre this conception of ourselves is deeply mistaken; in truth, we are each a 'nothingness', a stream of consciousness unified as a self for whom there is a world, but not an object within that world.

Along with this misconception of ourselves there is a similar realist misconception of values, to the effect that these are aspects of the world which, of themselves, impose demands upon us. It seems to us that 'Values are sown on my path as thousands of little real demands, like the signs which order us to keep off the grass'; but in truth 'Value derives its being from

its exigency and not its exigency from its being' (Sartre 1943: 38). Indeed these misconceptions are at bottom the same, since, for Sartre, the choice of oneself is fundamentally a choice of an ideal which both unifies a life by giving meaning to it and situates it in a world by giving significance to phenomena. So the 'exigency' which gives being to one's values is the demand that comes from one's choice of the kind of person one aims to be. Since this choice is the fundamental exercise of freedom, 'It follows that my freedom is the unique foundation of values and that *nothing*, absolutely nothing, justifies me in adopting this or that particular value' (Sartre 1943: 38). By contrast, however, the realist about values fails, indeed refuses, to recognize that he has this kind of freedom and represents his values as capable of justification within an absolute theory,—religious, metaphysical, or even scientific, as the Comtean humanist believes. One form of this realist illusion is a belief in natural rights of man, and in *Nausea* Sartre ridicules the bourgeois leaders of Bouville depicted in the art gallery for their complacent belief that in their life they have performed the duties and enjoyed the rights appropriate for maintaining the moral order of the universe. But this realist illusion is, for Sartre, equally characteristic of the Marxist's 'spirit of seriousness' whereby it is supposed that the demands of morality are inherent within the historical dialectic so that a Marxist (such as Bruno in Sartre's 1945 trilogy of novels *The Roads to Freedom*) takes himself to be under an obligation to support the proletariat because this is what the Marxist science of society prescribes without realizing that in truth this obligation manifests his own free choice of values (Sartre 1943: 580). Much of *Being and Nothingness* is an exploration of the manifold ways in which this illusory realist faith that there is some absolute justification for values which would enable one to justify one's life permeates our ordinary consciousness and activities. Sartre thinks of it as a search for 'foundation', and writes that under this illusion:

> Every human reality is a passion in that it projects losing itself so as to found being and by the same stroke to constitute the In-itself which escapes contingency by being its own foundation, the *Ens causa sui*, which religions call God. Thus the passion of man is the reverse of that of Christ, for man loses himself as man in order that God may be born. But the idea of God is contradictory and we lose ourselves in vain. Man is a useless passion. (Sartre 1943: 615)

Indeed, because such a life is 'useless', it leads to the nihilist conclusion that 'all human activities are equivalent . . . and that all are on principle doomed to failure. Thus it amounts to the same thing whether one gets drunk alone or is a leader of nations' (Sartre 1943: 627).

Despite appearances, however, it is not Sartre's view that absolutely all activities are 'doomed to failure'. That conclusion applies only to lives informed by the realist illusion that there is an absolute foundation for values. But what of a life freed from this realist illusion? For Sartre this insight is likely to induce 'anguish' since 'It is anguish before values which is the recognition of the ideality of values' (Sartre 1943: 38; it is important to grasp that the term 'ideality' here contrasts with 'reality'—Sartre's point is not that values are ideals, since the realist also accepts this); this anguish manifests our sense that as 'a being by whom values exist, I am unjustifiable. My freedom is anguished at being the foundation of values while itself without foundation' (Sartre 1943: 38). In the closing sentences of *Being and Nothingness* Sartre suggests that once one understands this anguish properly and internalizes the true 'ideality of values' a quite different kind of life becomes possible, a life which he proposes to discuss in a work explicitly about morality. Notoriously this work was never published, and we, his readers, are therefore left to reconstruct the substance of Sartre's intentions from a variety of sources, including his lecture *Existentialism is a humanism*. For it is clear that his existential humanism is precisely the thesis that, not only is this different kind of life possible, but also that it alone offers a way in which human life is not 'doomed to failure'. Before returning to this lecture for more details, however, it is worth noting a couple of other helpful texts.

The first is a passage from Sartre's wonderful *War Diaries* (Sartre 1983a), the diaries he kept during the phoney war of 1939–40 when he was serving in the French army. In these diaries, among many other things, Sartre sketches lines of thought which he goes on to develop in *Being and Nothingness* but he also sets down some points which do not appear so clearly there or elsewhere, including the following passage:

> But if human reality is for its own end, if morality is the law that regulates *through* the world the relationship between human reality and itself, the first consequence is that human reality is obliged to account only to itself for its morality. . . . The second consequence is that there's no way to determine the prescriptions of that morality, except by determining the nature of human reality. We must take care here not to fall into the error which consists in deriving values from facts. For human reality is not a fact. (Sartre 1983a: 108–9)

It is the last part of this which is revealing; for, one might say, the realist illusion of the Comtean humanist is that one can derive values from facts about human nature; whereas the existential humanist denies that human reality is a fact and precisely from this denial seeks to 'determine the prescriptions' of morality. The second passage comes from Sartre's discussion of Descartes'

radically voluntarist thesis that truths of all kinds are dependent on God's will. Sartre argues that the freedom Descartes here attributed to God in fact belongs to man, and that the recognition of this freedom is the 'basis of humanism':

> 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. (Sartre 1947a: 184)

These two texts indicate the fundamental direction of Sartre's line of thought. Human reality is not a 'fact' because facts concern states of affairs within the world, and so far from belonging within the world, human reality, or man, 'is the being as a result of whose appearance a world exists'. But how are we then to determine the prescriptions of morality from this conception of man? Sartre's belief is that the reflective assimilation of this way of thinking about our creative activity does have some implications for the way in which we should live. The claim, cited earlier that '*nothing*, absolutely nothing, justifies me in adopting this or that particular value' (Sartre 1943: 38) has to be understood as ruling out justifications which cite external 'facts' of the kind invoked by the realist, but as leaving open the possibility of justifications which arise from a reflective understanding of the truth of existential humanism, that 'my freedom is the unique foundation of values'. In effect the position here is Kantian: external, 'heteronomous', prescriptions are unjustifiable impositions, but an autonomous freedom which takes its own creative freedom as essential to its own possibilities can find there a basis for an authentic form of life which will also be a moral life. One element of this life, identified as such in *Existentialism and Humanism*, will be a refusal to engage in self-deception (Sartre 1946: 51), in particular concerning one's own responsibilities. One can see how this prescription emerges from Sartre's test, but what is much more contentious is his claim that because of my recognition that my own freedom is dependent upon that of others, and vice versa, 'I am obliged to will the liberty of others at the same time as mine' (Sartre 1946: 52). For it is not clear how this obligation arises, nor how it is consistent with other things Sartre says in *Being and Nothingness*. I want to leave this issue aside for the moment, however, since it is central to Lukács's critique of Sartre which I discuss below. Instead I want to look briefly at Sartre's *Notebooks for an Ethics* of 1947–8 (Sartre 1983b).[2]

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[2] Here too Sartre has been ill-served by his translator: Sartre's title is 'Cahiers pour une morale' and he writes consistently about morality ('une morale'). His translator seems to treat 'ethics' as a mere

These *Notebooks* are of course Sartre's preparatory sketches for the book, 'Une morale', which was supposed to follow *Being and Nothingness* and provide a positive account of his existential humanism. Since the notebooks are nearly six hundred pages long there is no question of providing a detailed discussion of them here. But there is one point which merits some attention. Towards the end, Sartre discusses at length the theme of the quasi-religious 'conversion' which is supposed to make possible 'the realm of morality'. This conversion is described as taking 'human freedom as the foundation of the world's being', and thereby giving 'a foundation to one's being by creating something outside oneself' (Sartre 1983b: 470). Manifestly, this theme of 'freedom as foundation' connects directly with *Existentialism is a Humanism*, and what is then notable is the way in which he develops this. First, he writes about 'the true relation between things and the authentic man, . . . which is neither identification nor appropriation: to lose oneself so that some reality may be' (Sartre 1983b: 495). As an example of this kind of 'losing oneself' he alludes to Antoine Saint-Exupéry's description of a flight over mountains: in this case 'my action suddenly makes the being of the mountains unfold, like a flower that blossoms, and I want this being with the very movement that brings it about that I choose myself' (Sartre 1983b: 487). Hence authenticity brings with it a kind of humility in relation to the world, the 'humility of finitude' (Sartre 1983b: 498). So the implication of an authentic understanding of humanism, of man as 'the being as a result of whose appearance a world exists', is not that man should arrogate to himself the divine role of creation, but instead that he should accept with humility the role of losing himself in the course of bringing being to things. This is not the way of losing oneself he had discussed in *Being and Nothingness* (see the passage from Sartre (1943: 615 cited earlier to the effect that 'Man is a useless passion'); the thought there was that we should 'lose' ourselves in finding or constructing a God-like absolute foundation for values. Here, by contrast, no such foundation is sought; instead we lose ourselves simply by being that whereby the contingent but wonderful value of things is made manifest.

The second way in which Sartre develops this theme concerns relationships between people. What Sartre says here overlaps with the point alluded to earlier but still to be discussed, that authentic freedom is supposed to bring with it a commitment to respecting the freedom of others; but what is again

terminological variant of 'morality' and uses the terms interchangeably to translate 'morale'. In truth, of course, ethics concerns a good deal more than morality.

notable here is the way in which Sartre emphasizes the revelatory aspect of our interdependence:

> For example, the other *becomes* witty if I exist. He cannot be witty for himself. To be witty is to reveal a certain new, unexpected, humorous aspect of the world, filled with insight. But the one who *reveals* this aspect grasps only the *aspect*, he makes fun of the world. (Sartre 1983b: 507)

In this respect, therefore, our relation with others is like our relation with the world: 'And as with regard to pure Being, I rejoice that the Other should become what he is through my passion' (Sartre 1983b: 507–8). But in this case there is also a difference: 'Yet I do not limit myself to conferring another dimension of being on him. I also make myself the guardian of his finitude. In my freedom his freedom finds safety: I am the one who watches his back' (Sartre 1983b: 508). This concern for another, however, is a concern for that particular person, and this, Sartre maintains, is characteristic of authenticity:

> This project that the authentic man of action pursues is never 'the good of humanity', but rather in such and such particular circumstances, with such and such means, at such and such historical conjuncture, the liberation or the development of such and such concrete group. (Sartre 1983b: 507)

This point, then, gives us a final mark of Sartre's existential humanism: whereas the Comtean humanist does indeed affect to worship 'the good of humanity', the Sartrean humanist's concern is directed towards those with whom he is actually engaged, those whose life in some way makes a difference to his own.

§3 Existentialism or Marxism

In 1947 Lukács published a Marxist critique of existentialism under the title *Existentialism or Marxism* (Lukács 1948). This includes a substantial discussion of Sartre's lecture in which Lukács criticizes Sartre's remarks in the lecture about the 'obligation to will the freedom of others'. Lukács notes that in *Being and Nothingness* Sartre had taken a very different position, to the effect that 'respect for the freedom of others is an empty word: if we could ever form the project of respecting this liberty, any attitude that we would take to the other would be a violation of that liberty which we were pretending to respect' (Sartre 1943: 409). Hence, Lukács concludes:

The contradiction is clear. Of course, it is not our business to control the orthodoxy of existentialism, and if this were only a concession made to facilitate the development of the doctrine, we would not press the point. But, in our opinion, this contradiction lies at the foundations of existentialism itself, in connection with its doctrines of ontological solipsism and irrationalism. (Lukács 1948: 110–11)

It is clear that Lukács has identified an important issue here. His claim that this contradiction is not just a superficial mistake by Sartre but 'lies at the foundations of existentialism' poses a serious challenge to Sartre's existential humanism, and, Lukács infers, shows the superiority of his own 'Marxist humanism'. I shall discuss this Marxist humanism below; but first it is necessary to return to Sartre to assess Lukács's criticism.

If one goes back to *Being and Nothingness* and the account Sartre gives there of our fundamental relationships with others, the justice of Lukács's criticism is hard to dispute. Sartre's account starts from his fundamental conception of consciousness as a pure appearance, an intentional act which is nothing more than the appearance of things other than itself but which also differentiates itself from the things of which it is the appearance and thus does not occur within the world which appears to it. Sartre thus infers that there is an unbridgeable gulf between the way in which we are for ourselves, namely this elusive free consciousness to which a world appears, and the way in which we are for others, namely something which appears to them as having certain characteristics. For simply by being manifest to another person, as an 'object' in the world which is the correlate of their consciousness, our own elusive freedom is qualified by being interpreted in the light of their presumptions and projects. All objectification is alienation, and Sartre captures this alienation in a brief, chilling, dialogue:

'I swear to you that I will do it.'

'Maybe so. You tell me so. I want to believe you. It is indeed possible that you will do it.' (Sartre 1943: 265)

In the light of this approach to our understanding of each other, it is not surprising that Sartre concludes in *Being and Nothingness* that 'respect for the freedom of others is an empty word'. The issue, therefore, is whether there is any way for him to escape Lukács's charge of contradiction when in 'Existentialism is a Humanism' he writes of our 'obligation to will the freedom of others'. Sartre hints in *Being and Nothingness* that an alternative way of relating to others, arising from an 'ethics of deliverance and salvation', may be possible after 'a radical conversion' (Sartre 1943: 412 fn.), and it is clear

in 'Existentialism is a Humanism' (and the *Notebooks for an Ethics*) that he connects such a conversion with the transformation to authentic existence whose possibility is celebrated in the lecture. But it is also clear that this thesis is problematic. It is easy to associate the attitudes characteristic of inauthentic existence, such as the spirit of seriousness, with a tendency to think of oneself primarily as one is for others, especially if one thinks of the situation of children who have little option but to think of themselves in this way. But this association would imply that authenticity comes with a kind of self-consciousness in which one liberates oneself from dependence upon others; and Sartre himself suggests this when he writes at this time, concerning Baudelaire: 'He saw that freedom led necessarily to absolute solitude and to a total responsibility' (Sartre 1947b: 66).

The only way to bring interdependence into this story would be to argue that the achievement of this kind of 'absolute solitude' requires a collective effort of liberation. Yet if our relations with others are fundamentally alienating, as Sartre argued in *Being and Nothingness*, it cannot be that it is precisely by joining with others that we liberate ourselves. In the *Notebooks for an Ethics*, as we saw above, Sartre does indeed affirm the possibility of authentic relationships with others which allow for a 'deeper recognition and reciprocal comprehension of freedoms' (Sartre 1983b: 414). But it remains unclear how this is possible since he still conceives of this possibility as a transformation which supervenes upon relationships which are fundamentally alienating:

> All of History has to be comprehended as a function of that primitive alienation from which mankind cannot escape. Alienation is not oppression. It is the predominance of the Other in the pair Other and Same, the priority of the objective, and consequently the necessity of all behaviour and ideology to project itself into the element of the Other and to return to their promoters as alienated and alienating. (Sartre 1983b: 413)

Contrary to the message of this passage, what is needed is a demonstration that the possibility of mutual recognition of interdependence was in fact available right from the start, within the basic structures of consciousness, and was only obstructed by the habits and misconceptions which are characteristic of the spirit of seriousness. It is an open question, which I shall not attempt to answer here, whether one can construct a demonstration of this kind while remaining faithful to Sartre's phenomenological ontology. Clearly any such demonstration would imply that the account of being-for-others set out in *Being and Nothingness* is crucially incomplete.

This conclusion leaves the assessment of Sartre's existential humanism incomplete. But what of existential humanism itself? Although this position is predominantly associated with Sartre, it is worth looking briefly at his contemporary, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, for an alternative approach to it. Merleau-Ponty never presented his own version of existential humanism in an essay on the subject comparable, say, to Sartre's lecture. But in a series of essays from 1946–7 in which he discusses the relationship between liberalism and Marxism, which he published as a single volume under the title *Humanism and Terror*, he endorses a 'humanism in extension' which, he says,

> acknowledges in every man a power more precious than his productive capacity, not in virtue of being an organism endowed with such and such a talent, but as a being capable of self-determination and of situating himself in the world. (Merleau-Ponty 1947: 176)

This is substantially the same as Sartre's existential humanism; and the connection with existentialism is explicit when, at the end of the same essay, Merleau-Ponty contrasts a 'bad existentialism' which 'exhausts itself in the description of the collision between reason and the contradictions of experience and terminates in the consciousness of defeat' (Merleau-Ponty 1947: 188) with a philosophy which recognizes that 'the human world is an open or unfinished system and the same radical contingency which threatens it with discord also rescues it from the inevitability of disorder and prevents us from despairing of it' (Merleau-Ponty 1947: 188).

What now needs attention is the way in which Merleau-Ponty seeks to avoid the impasse which is, arguably, the fate of Sartre's position. The key to this is that in his masterpiece, his *Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty 1945a), Merleau-Ponty rejects Sartre's fundamental conception of a consciousness which is just the pure appearance of things, and argues that what is fundamental to human life is not consciousness at all but behaviour which manifests a capacity for perception and action rooted in our embodiment. Despite this emphasis on the role of the body, however, Merleau-Ponty argues that our powers of perception and action are not the product of neural and other physiological systems that are independently explicable in causal scientific terms; instead he argues that there is here an original phenomenon, an 'operative intentionality', whereby perception and voluntary movement give meaning to things in a way which is antecedent to explicit conceptualization or representation in language and

which thereby ensures that our life is fundamentally a way of 'being-in-the-world':

> We found beneath the intentionality of acts, or thetic intentionality, another kind which is the condition of the former's possibility; namely an operative intentionality already at work before any positing or any judgment.. (Merleau-Ponty 1945a: 429)

With this thesis as his foundation Merleau-Ponty is then able in the final chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception* to develop an account of human freedom which differs radically from Sartre's. Where Sartre holds that our elusive, self-differentiating, freedom is an essential feature of every act of consciousness, and therefore that all talk of 'liberation' can amount only to reflective grasp of the significance of a freedom we already possess, Merleau-Ponty holds that personal freedom is a possibility for change that is always available to us but by no means always likely. Thus, in a characteristic passage he begins by setting out Sartre's view: 'I am free in relation to fatigue to precisely the extent that I am free in relation to my being in the world, free to make my way by transforming it' (Merleau-Ponty 1945a: 441). But he then continues by qualifying the position thus advanced: 'But here once more we must recognize a sort of sedimentation of our life: an attitude towards the world, when it has received frequent confirmation, acquires a favoured status for us' (Merleau-Ponty 1945a: 441). So although by means of a free act we can always 'blow away' such an attitude, 'having built our life upon an inferiority complex which has been operative for twenty years, it is not *probable* that we shall change' (Merleau-Ponty 1945a: 442).

One result of this difference is that Merleau-Ponty's existential humanism is not vulnerable to the charge of vacuousness in the way that Sartre's position is—Lukács complains that because, for Sartre 'my freedom is just any act (getting on a tram, lighting a cigarette, or not doing so)' his position 'deprives liberty itself of all meaning' (Lukács 1948: 112). Equally Merleau-Ponty argues that because the significance of much of our behaviour is unreflective and pre-personal, we do not confront each other as subjects inevitably opposed to each other; instead we live in a common world whose meaning is essentially intersubjective. Thus whereas Sartre exemplified the alienation that comes with objectification by the brief, chilling, dialogue quoted above, for Merleau-Ponty the experience of dialogue is exemplary of precisely the opposite point of view, the way in which our openness to each other enables us to develop a shared understanding:

In the experience of dialogue, there is constituted between the other person and myself a common ground; my thought and his are interwoven into a single fabric, my words and those of my interlocutor are called forth by the state of the discussion, and they are inserted into a shared operation of which neither of us is the creator. We have here a dual being, where the other is for me no longer a mere bit of behaviour in my transcendental field, or I in his; we are collaborators for each other in consummate reciprocity. Our perspectives merge with each other, and we co-exist through a common world. (Merleau-Ponty 1945a: 354)

It is obvious, then, that Merleau-Ponty is not vulnerable to the objection which Lukács levels at Sartre concerning his commitment to further the freedom of others. For Merleau-Ponty, because our experience is fundamentally intersubjective it allows for interdependence from the start, as in the example of the dialogue in which 'we are collaborators in consummate reciprocity'. Hence there is no problem about his affirming this interdependence in the closing sentences of his *Phenomenology*:

I can miss being free only if I try to bypass my natural and social situation by refusing to take it up, in the first place, instead of assuming it in order to join up with the natural and human world. . . . Shall I risk my life for so little? Shall I give up my freedom in order to save freedom? There is no theoretical reply to these questions. But there are these *things* which stand, irrefutable, there is before you this person whom you love, there are these men whose existence around you is that of slaves, and *your* freedom cannot be willed without leaving behind its singular relevance, and without willing freedom *for all*. (Merleau-Ponty 1945a: 456)

In this way, therefore, Merleau-Ponty's remarks show how there can be an existential humanism which is freed from the difficulties inherent in Sartre's position. For Lukács, these difficulties sufficed to show the inadequacy of existential humanism as compared with Marxism; for Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, there is no essential opposition here. From one direction, he argues, Marxism needs to rid itself of materialist metaphysics and accommodate itself to the insights of existential phenomenology: 'a living Marxism should "save" and integrate existentialist research instead of stifling it' (Merleau-Ponty 1945b: 82). Equally, he argues, existentialism cannot be content with the kind of liberal humanism which rests content with the 'formal liberty' of individual rights and due process of law while concealing the exploitation of the weak by the strong. Instead, an existential commitment to freedom requires a willingness to engage with 'the practice of liberty, in the inevitably imperfect movement which joins us to others' (Merleau-Ponty 1947: xxiv), and this must lead to a willingness to join with Marxists in the struggle for 'actual' as

opposed to 'formal' liberty: 'the proletariat by his mode of existence, and as a "man of universal history" is the inheritor of liberal humanism. . . . Marxism is no immorality but rather the determination not to consider virtues and ethics only in the heart of each man but also in the coexistence of men' (Merleau-Ponty 1947: 125–6). So, for Merleau-Ponty, at least in 1947, an existential humanism should also be a Marxist humanism.

A few years later Merleau-Ponty was not so sure. In essays written in 1953–4, and collected in 1955 as *Adventures of the Dialectic* (Merleau-Ponty 1955), he reviewed sceptically the course of Marxist theory and communist political power during the first half of the twentieth century. In one of these essays he looked back at Lukács' '"Western" Marxism' (the phrase comes from Merleau-Ponty himself), in particular at the position Lukács had propounded in his essay 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat' which he published in his collection *History and Class-Consciousness*. What is significant for us here is the fact that it is in this essay that Lukács explains what he takes to be distinctive of 'Marx's humanism' (Lukács 1923: 190). Lukács starts from the old Protagorean formula that 'man is the measure of all things', which he takes to be essential to any humanist position, and he gives this formula an epistemological interpretation, as implying that all knowledge reflects a human perspective. But, drawing on Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*, Lukács transforms this relativist position into a dialectical one by taking it, first, that the human perspective is essentially one which draws upon the human capacity for action, or 'praxis' as Marx and Lukács call it, and, second, that the exercise of this capacity leads to changes in the circumstances of action, especially the methods and relations of production, which are then liable to alter the perspective of agents. So there is not just one human perspective, but a historical series of them whose order is 'dialectical'. But, he claims, there is one perspective which is privileged especially with respect to knowledge of social matters, namely that of the working class, or proletariat, since they alone experience the ways in which their own labour brings about changes in methods and relations of production. Through the changes in their own conditions of life they experience the fact '*history is the history of the unceasing overthrow of the objective forms that shape the life of man*' (Lukács 1923: 186; italics in the original); and as a result 'the proletariat is the identical subject-object of the historical process, i.e. the first subject in history that is (objectively) capable of an adequate social consciousness' (Lukács 1923: 199). Lukács finally takes it that this privileged perspective brings with it authority with respect to questions of moral and political action: 'Whether an action

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is functionally right or wrong is decided ultimately by the evolution of the proletarian class consciousness' (Lukács 1923: 199).

This conclusion shows how, for Lukács, Marxist humanism differs from the individualist existential humanism he later encountered in Sartre's lecture. Sartre in fact seems to have taken Lukács's criticisms very much to heart. For in his own later Marxist writings such as his *Critique of Dialectical Knowledge* the role of classes and other social groups is taken as fundamental and the significance of individual consciousness is correspondingly diminished. In Merleau-Ponty's case, by contrast, the intellectual direction runs in another direction. In *Humanism and Terror* he follows Lukács in affirming that 'the proletarian by his mode of existence, and as a "man of universal history" is the inheritor of liberal humanism' (Merleau-Ponty 1947: 125). But in *The Adventures of the Dialectic*, while acknowledging Lukács's originality and inspiration, he suggests that the dialectic has become stuck: the bureaucracy, rigidity, and downright oppression characteristic of the Soviet Union indicate that the Marxist theory of dialectical progress is called into question once a communist party has taken power and the proletariat has no obvious class enemy to confront. Hence he ends the book calling for 'a new liberalism' (Merleau-Ponty 1955: 225), which would appear to be an attempt to find a way of combining socialist values with liberal political institutions.

§4 Heidegger, 'Letter on Humanism'

In 1946 Jean Beaufret, a French philosopher with a special interest in recent German philosophy, wrote to Heidegger and invited him to respond to some questions which arose from Sartre's lecture 'Existentialism is a Humanism', which had just been published. Heidegger was at this time in a difficult situation since he had been prohibited from teaching by the French authorities in his part of occupied Germany and he therefore took this opportunity to reach out to French intellectual circles by responding at length to Beaufret's invitation with his 'Letter on Humanism' which was published in 1947.

In his 'Letter' Heidegger concentrates primarily on Beaufret's question concerning what humanism now means. Although Sartre's lecture provides the immediate context for this question, Beaufret may well have hoped that Heidegger would also reflect on the significance of the Second World War for the meaning of humanism. If so he will have been disappointed; for Heidegger

uses the 'Letter' to provide an extended statement of his current philosophical position, concentrating on an explanation of why he is not a 'humanist' in the accepted sense of the term, and, in particular, why he is not a humanist in Sartre's sense. Indeed, a subsidiary theme of the 'Letter' is his dissociation of his philosophical position from that of Sartre, a task which he must have felt that he needed to undertake in the light of the fact that Sartre had explicitly associated him (Heidegger) with his own position in his lecture.

Heidegger's objection to humanism is that humanism is committed to a way of thinking which is 'metaphysical' in the sense that it takes for granted that humanity has a determinate 'essence' or 'nature' as a determinate kind of thing by reference to which fundamental questions about the value and significance of human life can be answered. What Heidegger objects to here is that these humanist accounts of the essence of humanity proceed without starting from the question which he takes to be fundamental, namely that of the relationship between humanity and 'being'; for, he maintains, first, that it is only in the light of an answer to this question that one can provide a correct account of the essence of humanity, and, second, that the correct account is one which undermines humanist positions since this essential relationship between humanity and 'being' precludes humanity having the kind of essence that humanists assume. The question that then confronts readers of Heidegger at this point is what it is that he means by his references to 'being' as such in remarks such as the following:

> Accordingly, every humanism remains metaphysical. In defining the humanity of the human being, humanism not only does not ask about the relation of being to the essence of the human being; because of its metaphysical origin humanism even impedes the question by neither recognising nor understanding it. (Heidegger 1947: 245)

Being as such is not 'a' being, an individuated thing of some kind, such as God (Heidegger 1947: 252); instead it is that which is presupposed in all ordinary thought and talk, but not normally thought or represented at all. Indeed Heidegger maintains that the kind of thinking which best captures the 'truth of being' is poetry, a kind of writing which is necessarily elusive and suggestive, rather than representational. Nonetheless I think that one can approach Heidegger's intentions by construing his references to being as references to a possibility, namely the possibility of there being anything, where this is conceived not as a 'cosmic ground' (Heidegger 1947: 252) such as the primordial Big Bang of physical theory, but as the

'ontological' possibility that things be so-and-so at all, which one might express as the possibility of truth. In putting forward this suggestion I realize that this suggestion is open to the criticism that, as with the approach of the 'humanists' Heidegger criticizes, it seeks to tame the wild question of being by putting a 'metaphysical' interpretation on it; but in response I would urge three points. First, Heidegger himself frequently acknowledges the close relationship between being and truth, and propounds his famous account of truth as the 'un-covering' of being in a way which is congenial to my suggestion. Second, Heidegger's approach to philosophy is recognizably Kantian in spirit in that he keeps asking about the fundamental conditions for the possibility of intentionality, reason, and so on. Hence it is not alien to this approach to construe his question of being as a question about a possibility which he takes to be fundamental,—the possibility of things being so-and-so. Third, as will emerge below, this approach has the virtue of fitting well with one of the central themes of the 'Letter', namely that language has a central role in making the connection between humanity and being.

Returning now to Heidegger's objection to humanism, Heidegger's complaint is that humanists take for granted a certain way of thinking about the possibility of truth, namely that truths are captured by statements which represent the states of affairs which make them true; and this assumption, he thinks, leads them to treat things of all kinds, including human beings, as things with properties which can be thus represented by true statements, and thus as things with a definite nature or essence. According to Heidegger this 'metaphysical' assumption is at best misleading; fundamentally, truth is not the correspondence of true statements with that which they represent but the activity of bringing aspects of the world out into the open and thereby 'un-covering' them. But, Heidegger claims, the metaphysical assumption about truth as representation entered 'Western philosophy' through the genius of Plato and has decisively shaped not only the development of natural science from Aristotle onwards but also the subsequent philosophical tradition which runs from Plato to Nietzsche (whose work Heidegger strangely regards as the culmination of this metaphysical tradition) and within which all existing humanisms are located. This association between humanism and the Greeks explains why, as I noted at the start (§1), he takes it that humanism always involves a more or less tacit reference to Greek civilization; indeed when the 'Letter on Humanism' was first published in 1947 it was accompanied by Heidegger's 1942 paper on 'Plato's Doctrine of Truth' in which Heidegger

argues in detail that Plato's famous myth of the cave is to be understood as a way of introducing his theory of ideas as a representational paradigm for truth and knowledge; and Heidegger ends the paper with a brief statement of the thesis that 'the beginning of metaphysics in the thought of Plato is at the same time the beginning of "humanism" ' (Heidegger 1942: 181)—precisely the thesis he then elaborated in the 'Letter'.

What remains to be clarified here is why a non-metaphysical way of approaching the question of being should be so important when humanism is at issue. Heidegger expresses the relationship between humanity and being by a biblical metaphor—'the human being is the shepherd of being' (Heidegger 1947: 252; cf. p. 260). What he means by this is that it is distinctive of human beings that it is within human life that the condition for the possibility of things being so-and-so, i.e. the possibility of truth, is realized. Heidegger calls our capacity for realizing the possibility of truth 'ek-sistence'. This odd word is a new spelling of the word 'existence' (*Existenz*) and its introduction indicates a significant revision in Heidegger's conception of human existence. I say more about this below, but staying for the moment with the position advanced in the 'Letter' Heidegger takes it that it is 'ek-sistence' which is truly essential to humanity: 'What the human being is—or, as it is called in the traditional language of metaphysics, the "essence' of the human being—lies in his ek-sistence' (Heidegger 1947: 247). The negative claim about other humanisms is, then, that because they have failed to capture man's essential 'ek-sistent' capacity to bring truth into 'the clearing of being', they have provided inadequate accounts of human life within which one cannot say what it is for someone to 'become free for his humanity and find his worth in it' (Heidegger 1947: 245); and the corresponding positive claim is that the key to humanity's ek-sistence is language, the 'house of being' (Heidegger 1947: 239), which not only provides for the ontological possibility of truth but also provides the only answers worth having to the questions about human freedom and value which traditional humanism has attempted unsuccessfully to address; for it is in virtue of the fact that language is the house of being that it is also 'the home in which man dwells' (Heidegger 1947: 245).

Much here stills remains to be clarified, insofar as this is possible, and discussed. But a couple of verbal points should be quickly set aside. First, it just has to be accepted that Heidegger's use of the term 'metaphysics' is somewhat idiosyncratic. In his 1929 inaugural lecture at Freiburg 'What is Metaphysics?' he had himself used the term 'metaphysics' approvingly

to insist that 'metaphysics belongs to the "nature of the human being"' (Heidegger 1929: 96) because fundamental questions about 'the nothing' which transcend questions about the existence or not of particular beings or kinds can only be properly raised through experiences such as anxiety which are fundamental to human existence (Dasein, as he here calls it). In this usage, 'metaphysics' contrasts with 'science', so that his thesis is that scientific accounts of human nature are inadequate because they cannot encompass the metaphysical significance of experiences such as anxiety. But as his philosophical views changed during the early 1930s, in ways which I shall briefly discuss below, he came to use the term 'metaphysics' primarily for the kind of Platonic metaphysics of ideas which he took to be an essential precondition of scientific thought. Hence he thereafter expressed his own insistence on the importance of non-scientific, non-technological, ways of thinking, and especially on the importance of 'poetic' language as a way of bringing truth to being, precisely as an affirmation of a non-metaphysical way of thinking. The second verbal point is that in his 'Letter' Heidegger acknowledges that once he has expressed his own position as an account of the 'essence' of humanity, one might say that his position is not one which is 'against humanism' of all kinds, but involves instead an altogether new kind of humanism (Heidegger 1947: 263). In response, however, Heidegger indicates that his preference is to resist this move in order that the radical difference, as he sees it, between his own position, marked out as 'against' or 'beyond' humanism, and that of existing humanisms can be properly appreciated.

But is there really such a radical difference? A comparison here with Sartre is useful: Sartre, as we saw, contrasts his own existential humanism with previous humanisms, primarily for the reason that these other humanisms treated man as a kind of thing within the world with a specific nature that is to be celebrated or in other ways elaborated as a basis for addressing questions of value whereas his own existential humanism affirms that man is the being for which there is a world and that man's value precisely derives from this transcendental capacity. This sounds like Heidegger's contrast between metaphysical humanisms which treat man as 'a being' and his own non-metaphysical non-humanism which stresses man's essential ek-sistence whereby the truth of being is expressed and which in the 'Letter' he also describes as 'being-in-the-world' (Heidegger 1947: 266). But Heidegger is very insistent that Sartre's existential humanism is just another form of metaphysical humanism. The main explanation for this, I think, is to be found in the notorious passage in Sartre's lecture in which

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he represents himself as putting forward a definition of existentialism which Heidegger has also employed. Sartre writes:

> All the same, [existentialism] can easily be defined.
>
> The question is only complicated because there are two kinds of existentialists. There are, on the one hand, the Christians . . . ; and on the other the existential atheists, amongst whom we must place Heidegger as well as the French existentialists and myself. What they have in common is simply the fact that they believe that *existence* comes before *essence*—or, if you will, that we must begin from the subjective. (Sartre 1946: 26)

It is not difficult to understand why Heidegger was irritated by this passage and sought to dissociate himself from it. A small point is the description of him as an 'atheist': in fact, Heidegger's attitude to religion was much too complex to merit this description, which he rejected (Heidegger 1947: 266–7). A similar point is the description of him as an 'existentialist', which he always emphatically repudiated. But a much more substantive point concerns Sartre's use of the phrase 'existence comes before essence'. This phrase comes from *Being and Time* (Heidegger 1927: 68) but Sartre's use of it is rather different from Heidegger's. For Heidegger this phrase is a not very happy way of re-expressing the thesis he has just been making, that the essence of man (Dasein) is 'existence' (*Existenz*), which he explains in the following way: 'Dasein always understands itself in terms of its existence—in terms of a possibility of itself: to be itself or not itself. Dasein has either chosen these possibilities itself, or got itself into them, or grown up in them already' (Heidegger 1927: 33).

This is the thesis which I alluded to above when discussing the thesis of the 'Letter' that the essence of man is 'ek-sistence'. It is obvious that what sounds the same is in fact a very different claim, and I will come back to this difference below when discussing the relationship between *Being and Time* and the 'Letter'. But returning now to the relationship between Heidegger and Sartre, the emphasis on 'possibilities' is one that Sartre shares, though Sartre differs from Heidegger in holding that the possibilities that give us our personal identity are inescapably chosen, whereas for Heidegger this is only one way in which we acquire an identity defined in terms of possibilities for ourselves—it may also be that we have 'got into them' by chance or 'grown up in them' thanks to our parents and culture. What is more important here, however, is that although Sartre's phrase 'existence comes before essence' is supposed to identify the distinctive feature of human life as conceived by 'existentialists', he allows that the concept of existence employed here is not restricted to human beings, so that, for example, he can legitimately contrast

human beings with functional objects such paper-knives by saying that for them 'essence comes before existence'. But since Heidegger holds that the kind of 'existence' that is characteristic of man (Dasein) is quite different from the generic existence of things such as knives, he takes it that Sartre's use of the phrase 'existence comes before essence' is quite different from his own use of it, and remains constrained by the metaphysical presumption that men and knives are essentially similar beings, things which exist within the world. So, he concludes, if existentialism is defined by reference to the use of this phrase, understood as Sartre seems to understand it, then he, Heidegger, is certainly not an existentialist, and Sartre's existential humanism remains metaphysical.

This critical reaction is fair enough, given Sartre's loose use of language in the lecture. But it is a bit disappointing since it is clear from *Being and Nothingness* that Sartre's conception of consciousness is in some respects close to Heidegger's conception of Dasein as presented in *Being and Time*, and in particular in respect of the thesis that consciousness, and thus man, so far from being a phenomenon that occurs within the world, is that being whose nihilating intentionality gives significance to things as a world. So the question that we need to address is whether Heidegger's 'Letter' indicates why this position, Sartre's actual position, might be construed as 'metaphysical' or in other ways unsatisfactory. In thinking about this we can go back again to the 'definition' of existentialism in Sartre's lecture, but now to his gloss on the phrase 'existence comes before essence' as 'we must begin from the subjective'. The reference here to subjectivity is characteristically Sartrean, and recurs in his definition of existential humanism in the lecture:

> There is no other world except the human world, the world of human subjectivity. This relation of transcendence as constitutive of man (not in the sense that God is transcendent, but in the sense of self-surpassing) with subjectivity (in such a sense that man is not shut up in himself but forever present in a human world)—it is this we call existential humanism. (Sartre 1946: 55)

So here there is no loose language, but a point which is central to Sartre's conception of consciousness as 'subjectivity itself' (Sartre 1943: xxxiii). Furthermore it is fair to say that this aspect of Sartre's philosophy is the result of his attachment to metaphysics, the metaphysics of subjectivity as expounded by Descartes, which is explicitly endorsed by Sartre in the lecture (Sartre 1946: 44) and *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre 1943: 73–4). Since, as we saw earlier in the discussion of Sartre, this aspect of his philosophy leads to deep difficulties, at this point Heidegger's critique of Sartre strikes home.

At this point, however, one should also recall that Sartre's Cartesian metaphysics is not an essential feature of existential humanism; Merleau-Ponty's humanism is precisely an existential humanism that lacks the metaphysics of consciousness and subjectivity. So, one may wonder, is it vulnerable to Heidegger's critique? This is, I think, a complex question which cannot be pursued here.[3] But it is worth considering briefly how things stand in relation to Heidegger's position in *Being and Time*: could one regard this as a non-metaphysical form of existential humanism? In the 'Letter', Heidegger refers back many times to *Being and Time* to indicate the continuity of his thought while also acknowledging that the position put forward there was in some respects unsatisfactory: 'in order to make the attempt at thinking recognisable and at the same time understandable for existing philosophy, it could at first be expressed only within the horizon of that existing philosophy and the use of its terms' (Heidegger 1947: 271). This enigmatic remark should be read alongside a comment in volume IV of the published text of Heidegger's 1940 lectures on Nietzsche, in which a brief discussion of *Being and Time* ends with the following remark:

> Above all, however, the path taken terminates abruptly at a decisive point. The reason for the disruption is that the attempt and the path it chose confront the danger of unwillingly becoming merely another entrenchment of subjectivity; that the attempt itself hinders the decisive steps; that is, hinders an adequate exposition of them in their essential execution. (Heidegger 1961: 141)

The editors of the volume indicate that the typescript of the lectures suggests that this passage was not in fact part of the 1940 lectures, but was added later,—perhaps, they suggest, at the time of the 'Letter' (Heidegger 1961: 140 fn.). So, one can ask, why this anxiety about 'subjectivity' in *Being and Time*? For there is no question but that in *Being and Time* Heidegger emphatically rejects the Cartesian metaphysics of subjective consciousness which Sartre retained (see, for example, Heidegger 1927: 87–90, and especially pp. 417–18). I am not sure what Heidegger had in mind, but there is a central theme of *Being and Time* which both invites the accusation of being a kind of subjectivism and which does not recur in the 'Letter', namely the discussion of authenticity.

Heidegger introduces the distinction between authentic and inauthentic modes of existence at the start of *Being and Time* (Heidegger 1927: 68), but the

[3] I think that in *Phenomenology of Perception* there is a strand of subjectivism which invites Heidegger's criticism; but one of the changes which Merleau-Ponty introduces into his position in *The Visible and the Invisible* removes the ground for this criticism. I discuss this issue in my essay 'Speaking and Spoken Speech', in T. Baldwin (ed.), *Reading Merleau-Ponty* (London: Routledge, 2007).

first sustained discussion of authenticity comes towards the end of Division One when he introduces the phenomenon of anxiety (*angst*). The significance of anxiety is that it reveals to us that we are 'not-at-home' in the world; in the passage that follows Heidegger discusses this by referring back to his discussion of 'being-in':

> Being-in was defined as 'residing alongside . . . ', 'Being-familiar with . . . '. This character of Being-in was then brought to view more concretely through the everyday publicness of the 'they', which brings tranquillized self-assurance—'Being-at-home', with all its obviousness—into the average everydayness of Dasein. On the other hand, as Dasein falls, anxiety brings it back from its absorption in the 'world'. Everyday familiarity collapses. Dasein has been individualised, but individualised *as* Being-in-the-world. Being-in enters into the existential 'mode' of the '*not-at-home*'. (Heidegger 1927: 233)

This is a difficult passage: although our existence is essentially being-in-the-world, anxiety makes clear to us that properly speaking we are 'not-at-home' in the world; as he puts it, '*From an existential-ontological point of view, the "not-at-home" must be conceived as the more primordial phenomenon*' (Heidegger 1927: 234; Heidegger's emphasis). But what is it to be 'in-the-world' but not 'at-home' in it? It is, I think, not to take one's goals and possibilities from those which are conventionally endorsed within the world, from the 'they'-world; instead, as Heidegger puts it here, 'Anxiety makes manifest in Dasein its *Being towards* its ownmost potentiality-for-Being—that is, its *Being-free-for* the freedom of choosing itself and taking hold of itself' (Heidegger 1927: 232). In this way, as Heidegger puts it, anxiety 'individualizes' each of us, thereby disclosing us to ourselves as '*solus ipse*'. This is a striking phrase and Heidegger then continues, manifesting, as one might put it, a degree of anxiety about what he has here let himself for:

> But this existential 'solipsism' is so far from the displacement of putting an isolated subject-Thing into the innocuous emptiness of a worldless occurring, that in an extreme sense what it does is precisely bring Dasein face to face with its world as world, and thus bring it face to face with itself as Being-in-the-world. (Heidegger 1927: 233)

One can see what Heidegger is driving at here—his conception of the individualization which is accomplished through anxiety and authentic choice of one's own way of fulfilling one's 'potentiality-for-being' is not a way of back-tracking on his anti-subjectivist emphasis on our essential being-in-the-world. Nonetheless the phrase 'existential solipsism' is very striking and indicative of what one might call an 'existential subjectivism'. After all, in his

discussion of anxiety Heidegger explicitly refers to Kierkegaard (see Heidegger 1927: 235 fn. iv), and Kierkegaard explicitly affirms that in this area 'Truth is subjectivity' because we have each to find our own individual way to salvation through the experience of *angst*.

My suggestion, therefore, is that through his account of authenticity Heidegger introduces into *Being and Time* a secularized version of Kierkegaard's existential subjectivism. Indeed it is precisely this aspect of *Being and Time*, much enhanced in the first three chapters of Division Two of the book, which gives this book its existential content and its emotional force, as in the following passage: 'Along with the sober anxiety which brings us face to face with our individualised potentiality-for-Being, there goes an unshakeable joy in this possibility' (Heidegger 1927: 358). It is clear too that this was the aspect of Heidegger's position which primarily captured Sartre's attention (the character of Orestes in Sartre's play *The Flies* exactly exemplifies Heidegger's combination of 'sober anxiety' and 'unshakeable joy') and led him to associate Heidegger with his own existential humanism. As we have seen, that association was in many ways misleading; but, equally, the presence of this strand of existential subjectivism or humanism in *Being and Time* should be recognized. Whether it should be classified as 'metaphysical' or not by the terms of Heidegger's categorization of metaphysics is not, I think, very important, though the fact, acknowledged by Heidegger himself, that its roots lie in Kierkegaard's theology suggest to me that it should be so classified.

Finally, now, we can return to the 'Letter on Humanism' and use the salient differences between the position advanced here and that found in *Being and Time* to identify the distinctive character of his later non-metaphysical non-humanism. One difference is manifest from the very first page of the 'Letter', in the claim that 'Language is the house of being. In its home human beings dwell' (Heidegger 1947: 239). Although in *Being and Time* Heidegger recognizes that language is an essential feature of human life, it does not have the ontological significance there which it has in the 'Letter'. If anything in *Being and Time* is the 'house of being' it is Dasein itself, humanity; but, as we have seen, authentic Dasein is precisely 'not-at-home' in the world, so there is no straightforward way in which one might conceive of man finding a home in Dasein. Indeed the significance of 'being at home' is reversed: in *Being and Time* authentic Dasein is 'not-at-home', and realizes its individualized potentiality-for-being only through the 'anticipatory resoluteness' through which it confronts its own 'freedom towards death' (Heidegger 1927: 311). In the 'Letter', by contrast, Heidegger points critically to the 'homelessness' of

modern man (Heidegger 1947: 258), which he associates with the 'devastation of language' (Heidegger 1947: 243) as it loses the capacity to express creative thought and becomes merely an instrument for technical control; and, equally, he expresses his hope that humanity may yet have a worthwhile future precisely through the possibility that men may yet be able to find a home in language. So, in effect, the existential humanism of *Being and Time* which is inherent in the conception of authenticity and the prospect of an 'individualised potentiality-for-being' is absent from the 'Letter'; the role of Dasein is largely taken over by language and the valency of the metaphor of 'being at home' is reversed. Heidegger then uses this metaphor to articulate the ethical content of his new non-metaphysical non-humanism, drawing characteristically on the fact that the root meaning of the Greek word 'ethos' is 'dwelling place'. The suggestion, then, is that we will be able to find an ethics when we are truly at home in language, that is when our language is one which enables us to think the truth of being: 'that thinking which thinks the truth of being as the primordial element of the human being, as one who eksists, is in itself originary ethics' (Heidegger 1947: 271).

This is Heidegger at his most enigmatic, but some points are clear. There is an unequivocal negative thesis, that it is not the business of philosophy to provide a 'code' of ethics, a determinate prescription as to how one should live: philosophers who attempt this 'overestimate philosophy' (Heidegger 1947: 276). The positive suggestion is that somehow from within the practice of using language in a creative way to bring truths to light one can find ways of living well, and indeed that there is no other legitimate way of achieving this:

> Only so far as the human being, ek-sisting into the truth of being, belongs to being can there come from being itself the assignment of those directives that must become law and rule for human beings. . . . Only such enjoining is capable of supporting and obligating. Otherwise all law remains merely something fabricated by human reason. (Heidegger 1947: 274)

It is difficult to know what to make of this: how can our being in the right, ek-sistent, relation to being enable us to live well? Since Heidegger holds that 'Language itself is poetry in the essential sense' (Heidegger 1950: 46) one suggestion here might be that we are to find value through activities which are like poetry and creative art, broadly conceived, and thus that Heidegger's thesis is similar to Nietzsche's thought that we are to live in a way which 'gives style' to our lives (*The Gay Science* §290). Although I think there is something to this, there is also a danger of setting up the romantic genius as an ethical

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ideal, and it is quite clear that this is not what Heidegger has in mind—he remarks that 'modern subjectivism . . . misinterprets creation as the product of the genius of the self-sovereign subject' (Heidegger 1950: 48). Thus we would do better here to think of the 'humility of finitude' which Sartre attempted to characterize in his *Notebooks on Ethics* (see §2 above).[4] But a full account of Heidegger's ethical position in the 'Letter' requires a much fuller discussion of his conception of being than I can provide here.[5] What I think one can confidently say is that the quietism of this ethical non-humanism which can be modelled on the 'inconspicuous furrows' that 'the farmer, slow of step, draws through the field' (Heidegger 1947: 276) will be very different from the 'unshakeable joy' of the authentic Dasein who projects his own individual potentiality-for-Being.

§5 Foucault: The End of Man

Heidegger's 'Letter on Humanism' was seized upon by the post-war generation of younger French philosophers who wanted to escape from the shadow cast by Sartre's philosophy and turned to German philosophers, especially Husserl and Heidegger, to help create a space in which they could work creatively without deferring to Sartre. This influence is clearly apparent in Michel Foucault's work.

In his 1978 lecture 'What is Enlightenment?' Foucault follows Heidegger in maintaining that 'what is called humanism has always been obliged to lean on certain conceptions of man borrowed from religion, science or politics. Humanism serves to color and to justify the conceptions of man to which it is, after all, obliged to take recourse' (Foucault 1984: 44). But Foucault does not follow Heidegger when he goes on to contrast humanism with a principle which he takes from Kant and which he affirms—'the principle of a critique and a permanent creation of ourselves in our autonomy: that is, a principle that is at the heart of the historical consciousness that the Enlightenment has of itself' (Foucault 1984: 44). As he explains, however, the kind of critique

[4] There is no explicit reference to Heidegger's 'Letter' in Sartre's *Notebooks*, but the dates are such that it seems likely that Sartre will have read Heidegger's 'Letter' while writing them.

[5] One would need, for example, to give proper consideration to his remarks about 'healing' and 'strife', in particular to the thought that 'being itself is in strife' (Heidegger 1947: 272). I think there is something to be gained from such an investigation, but this is not the place for it.

he has in mind is not Kant's: whereas Kant used his critiques to explore the limits of possibility in order to be able to demonstrate the mistakes one makes in attempting to transgress them, Foucault seeks to explore limits to possibility which turn out to depend on contingent circumstances so that we can transgress them. He puts it thus at the end of the lecture:

> I do not know whether it must be said today that the critical task still entails faith in Enlightenment; I continue to think that this work requires work on our limits, that is, a patient labour giving form to our impatience for liberty. (Foucault 1984: 50)

Much of Foucault's work lay precisely in this field, of exploring the contingent historical practices which lie behind repressive social practices in respect of the insane, the ill, the 'delinquent', and the sexually 'deviant'; and always the implication of recognizing the contingencies was that things could and should be different, that we should find other, less repressive, ways of dealing with the phenomena which give rise to our familiar institutions, the asylum, the clinic, and the prison. I shall not, however, attempt to describe here Foucault's immensely impressive work in these fields; what I shall concentrate on is the development of his views about 'man', from his early critique of the human sciences to his later discussions of the constitution of moral subjectivity.

Foucault undertakes his critique of the human sciences, the sciences of 'labour, life and language'—i.e. economics, human biology, and historical linguistics—in his 1966 book *The Order of Things* (Foucault 1966). One of his aims here is to demonstrate that the human sciences do not really deserve the name of science because they deal with a subject matter—'man'—which has been historically constituted in 'Western culture' during the nineteenth century but which lacks an enduring objective rationale and has indeed, he suggests, now passed its period of worthwhile use. It is difficult to know quite what to make of this. Foucault contrasts natural sciences such as chemistry which, he says, 'present characteristics of objectivity and systematicity which make it possible to define them as sciences' with inquiries which 'do not answer to those criteria, that is, their form of coherence and their relation to their objects are determined by their positivity alone' (Foucault 1966: 365), amongst which he counts the 'human sciences'. Thus the idea here seems to be that because the concept of man employed in these sciences does not characterize an enduring objective phenomenon, but only a culturally constituted one, whatever knowledge these 'sciences' accumulate is dependent on cultural formations that are liable to disintegrate. Furthermore, Foucault argues, not only are they liable to disintegrate, they are actually doing so

at present: we are reaching 'the end of man', whose concept will soon be erased 'like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea' (Foucault 1966: 387). Two themes seem to drive this sceptical thesis: one is that the concept of man employed in the human sciences is incoherent; the other that the phenomena (labour, life, and language) dealt with by the human sciences are much better dealt with in other ways. The first theme is developed in a series of arguments which largely revolve around the difficulty of maintaining a coherent perspective which treats man both as the subject of knowledge and as its object, as both subjective and objective. The difficulty here is familiar; but whether there is an insoluble aporia which should lead us to abandon the concept of something which can be both subject and object is disputable. Merleau-Ponty argues in *The Visible and the Invisible*, for example, that the 'reversibility' of the roles of subject and object is actually the essential feature of our being, exemplified both by our senses and by our living body (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 136–7). But Foucault seems more influenced by Heidegger, who would argue that instead of 'man' so conceived we need Dasein to get 'beyond' the subject/object dualism characteristic of modern 'metaphysics', or indeed, that we need to treat language as the primary phenomenon, the 'house of being'. This last point certainly chimes with the second theme of Foucault's argument, which is that the phenomena of labour, life, and language are much better handled through the resources of structuralist theory, at least in anthropology and linguistics, than by the traditional human sciences which start from assumptions about individual human subjects.

It is not clear that one should have to choose absolutely between an individualist perspective which looks to the intentions and beliefs of human subjects and a more generalized perspective which looks to intersubjective systems of meaning and dependence. The interpretation of a text, for example, would seem to require both perspectives. Foucault, however, is nothing if not consistent at this time in his anti-humanist repudiation of human subjectivity. In *The Order of Things* he cites the case of Mallarmé who 'was constantly effacing himself from his own language, to the point of not wishing to figure in it except as an executant in a pure ceremony of the Book in which the discourse would compose itself' (Foucault 1966: 306). Foucault presented himself as undertaking just such a 'pure ceremony' himself in a lecture he gave in 1969 under the title 'What is an Author?' (Foucault 1969). For he argues here that the author is simply he who, in our culture, performs certain 'functions' in relation to the appearance of a text; but one can conceive of cultures (e.g. those with oral traditions of song and poetry) where texts are not

tied to authors, and, he suggests, our own culture is moving in that direction, so that we should no longer ask 'Who really spoke? . . . With what authenticity or originality?' (Foucault 1969: 119), but instead we might simply ask 'What are the modes of existence of this discourse?' and even (and this was the last sentence of the lecture) 'What difference does it make who is speaking?' (Foucault 1969: 120). We might well agree that from the point of view of assessing what is said, indeed, it should not make a difference who is speaking; but from the point of view of understanding what is said, it is hard to deny that it often does make a difference since we tailor our understanding of each other to our knowledge of each other's situation and experience.

A central theme of Foucault's anti-humanism was that there is no one fundamental 'human nature', but that varied forms of human subjectivity have been constituted by different cultural practices. One of the most interesting areas in which he explored this theme was that which he thought of as the constitution of 'moral' subjectivity in the context of sexual behaviour. He argued that in the ancient world sexual conduct was largely governed by 'aesthetic' values, concerning the kinds of pleasure whose enjoyment is consistent with a dignified life as opposed to those which are 'base' because in giving way to them one shows oneself to be unable to control one's appetites. But when Christianity became established, he argued, a different set of values, primarily concerning purity and the avoidance of sin, are introduced. Hence, he concludes in his 1983 interview in Berkeley:

> Consequently, between paganism and Christianity, the opposition is not between tolerance and austerity, but between a form of austerity which is linked to an aesthetics of existence and other forms of austerity which are linked to the necessity of renouncing the self and deciphering its truth. (Foucault 1983: 366)

A question to which this passage gives rise, as does Foucault's whole approach, is whether proper recognition of the malleability of human nature, a malleability which reaches into the constitution of the most intimate areas of life, conduces to a moral relativism which holds that there is nothing determinate to be said in favour of one type of practice as opposed to any other beyond its conformity to one prevailing set of cultural circumstances rather than another. But this question is no sooner posed than answered: Foucault remained true to the critical principle he enunciated in his lecture on the Enlightenment, the principle which offers to each of us the possibility of 'a permanent creation of ourselves in our autonomy' and commends 'the philosophical ethos appropriate to the critical ontology of ourselves as a

historico-practical test of the limits that we may go beyond, and thus as work carried out by ourselves upon ourselves as free beings' (Foucault 1984: 47). But what is characteristic of Foucault's position is that he holds that current conceptions of human nature can tell us little that is useful about what would count as exercises of 'autonomy' and 'freedom'; instead we have to work out by his kind of patient genealogical inquiry which possibilities should in fact be available to us, and in this way extend our freedom. One can still ask, however, whether he has any test for the value of these possibilities. The answer given in his 1983 interview is this: 'From the idea that the self is not given to us, I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art' (Foucault 1983: 351). This passage comes from a paragraph in which Foucault discusses and rejects Sartre's existential humanism. But Foucault's discussion shows that he misunderstands Sartre, attributing to him the view that authenticity requires of us that we be our 'true self', and contrasting that position with his own, according to which the test of authenticity is whether one's life is genuinely creative. As the discussion in §2 indicated, however, this position is in fact close to that of Sartre who remarks that 'There is this in common between art and morality, that in both we have to do with creation and invention' (Sartre 1946: 49). Thus so far from escaping from Sartre's shadow, and despite his sceptical anti-humanism, Foucault ends up affirming a position which is recognizable as a version of existential humanism.

§6 Derrida: The End of Humanism

The philosopher who, more than anyone else, took to heart Heidegger's critique of humanism was Foucault's contemporary and adversary, Jacques Derrida. Derrida wrote far too much for me to attempt to show here the role of this theme in his work; so I shall content myself here with a discussion of its role in Derrida's early work in which he launches his conception of deconstruction, and then take a brief look at one of Derrida's later works in which a more complex position seems to be advanced.

In his 1968 lecture 'The Ends of Man' (Derrida 1972) Derrida begins by expounding the main theme of Heidegger's 'Letter', to the effect that the humanism propounded by Sartre is 'metaphysical' in a pejorative sense, and he proceeds to show how this bad humanism infected the interpretation of

the German philosophers Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger whose works set the intellectual context for mid-twentieth-century French philosophy, even giving rise to the translation of Heidegger's *Dasein* as '*la réalité humaine*' ('human reality'). Having set this out, however, Derrida proceeds to show that a kind of humanism is still to be found in the work of Hegel, Husserl, and even Heidegger through the special role they assign to 'man' in their philosophy. Derrida focuses particularly on Heidegger's 'Letter', on the special relationship between man and being such that through the capacity for 'ek-sistence' man is the distinctive shepherd of being. Derrida picks out one of Heidegger's ways of making this point: 'This way of being is proper (*eigen*) only to the human being' (Heidegger 1947: 247). Derrida emphasizes Heidegger's use here of the term '*eigen*', which is of course connected with the term standardly translated as 'authenticity'—*Eigentlicheit*. So the suggestion is that something of Heidegger's earlier conception of authenticity is carried forward into his 'Letter' in his conception of the proper relationship between man and being. Derrida then closes the lecture by wondering whether this thesis should still be accepted, that is whether we do still accept 'the co-belonging and co-propriety of the name of man and the name of Being' (Derrida 1972: 133). Using a term which is significant for him, and to which I shall return, he suggests that this thesis is now 'trembling', and he suggests that if we read Nietzsche, not as the last metaphysician, as Heidegger read him, but as the first post-metaphysical philosopher, we can begin to see what it might be to think of a form of life which finally moves 'beyond' humanism.

If we now go back to Derrida's 1967 masterpiece *Of Grammatology* we find again the talk of 'trembling' (Derrida 1967: 24), here used as a way of introducing the conception of deconstruction as a kind of subversive conceptual reconstruction from the inside. Derrida introduces deconstruction here precisely because he wants to deconstruct Heidegger's account of the 'proximity' of man to being by situating it alongside his own conception of '*différance*'. Derrida's thought here is difficult to grasp, but one can get some sense of it from the passage in which he makes this proposal:

> To come to recognize, not within but on the horizon of the Heideggerian paths, and yet in them, that the meaning of being is not a transcendental or trans-epochal signified . . . but already. . . . a determined signifying trace, is to affirm that within the decisive concept of ontico-ontological difference, *all is not to be thought at one go*; a being and being, ontic and ontological, 'ontico-ontological' are, in an original style, *derivative* with regard to difference; and with respect to what I shall later call

differance, an economic concept designating the production of differing/deferring. (Derrida 1967: 23; Derrida's emphasis)

I shall say more below about 'diffrance', but the point to grasp now is that Derrida here proposes not to displace altogether Heidegger's account of being and the associated distinctions between beings ('ontic') and being itself ('ontological'), but to deconstruct it by showing how meaning, and thus being, are constituted through the work of differance, though not 'all at one go'.

What then is 'differance' and the 'production of differing/deferring'? Derrida holds that the possibility of meaning depends upon the use of systems of signs, or, more generally systems of 'traces', since the account is intended to apply to contents of any kind and not just linguistic meanings. He further argues that the systems which organize these traces are both synchronic, so that meaning is expressed through systematic 'differences' between different traces (one can think here of colour words whose meaning depends on their role within the network of different terms by which different colours are named), and also diachronic, so that meaning is also individuated through the 'deferred' use of similar tokens, or traces, in later contexts. Using the jargon of analytical philosophy one can approximate Derrida's conception of the 'originary' differance by thinking of it as the fusion of holism about meaning ('difference') with the rule-following considerations ('deferring'). Derrida then draws from this position three key implications. First: meaning, or content, requires systems of signs or traces. So the best model for language is as a kind of 'writing' that involves differential systems of traces which persist and can be used by many 'writers', rather than as a form of 'speech' whose meaning we are tempted to think of as constituted for the speaker by a one-off association between the spoken sound and his subjective idea. Second, once it is understood that meaning does not come 'all at one go', it follows that meanings, including the meaning of being, should not be thought of as 'present to consciousness' or even manifest 'in the clearing'; instead meaning here and now is inescapably dependent on what is 'absent', on the use of other signs and the use of the same sign on other occasions, what Derrida calls 'the presence-absence of the trace' which, he says, 'one should not even call its ambiguity but rather its play' (Derrida 1967: 71). Third, because it is through this 'play of presence-absence' that meaning is constituted, it cannot be made the object of a science (Derrida 1967: 57).

Derrida then uses these implications to elaborate his deconstructive criticism of Heidegger's residual humanism, his attachment to the thought that

man is the 'proper' shepherd of being. Derrida puts the point clearly in the following passage:

> To make enigmatic what one thinks one understands by the words 'proximity', 'immediacy', 'presence' (the proximate [*proche*], the own [*propre*], and the 'pre-' of presence), is my final intention in this book. This deconstruction of presence accomplishes itself through the deconstruction of consciousness, and therefore through the irreducible notion of the trace. (Derrida 1967: 70)

Heidegger, of course, does not invoke 'consciousness' (perhaps Derrida has Sartre in mind at this point); but, as we saw in §4, the special role of man in relation to being, his 'proximity' to being, is central to the 'Letter'. So Derrida's 'final intention' has been to deconstruct the terms of Heidegger's residual humanism. But one should now ask what account of 'man', if any, Derrida himself has to offer. Not surprisingly it turns out to be precisely the vehicle, if one can so speak, of differance, or 'supplementarity', as Derrida calls it in the following passage:

> Thus supplementarity makes possible all that constitutes that is proper (*propre*) to man: speech, society, passion etc. But what is this 'proper' to man? On the one hand, it is that of which the possibility must be thought before man, and outside of him. Man allows himself to be announced to himself after the fact of supplementarity, which is thus not an attribute—accidental or essential—of man. For, on the other hand, supplementarity, which *is nothing*, neither a presence nor an absence, is neither a substance nor an essence of man. It is precisely the play of presence and absence, the opening of this play that no metaphysical or ontological concept can comprehend. (Derrida 1967: 244)

So even for Derrida it still makes sense to ask about what is proper to man. The answer, however, is not the presence of being to man, but the play of presence and absence which alone makes possible 'speech, society, passion etc.' and thus human life.

I want to look finally at Derrida's much later (1992) discussion of some ethical themes in his book *The Gift of Death* (Derrida 1992). For this discussion indicates, to me at least, a significant development in Derrida's account of human life; and it also provides, as we shall see, ways of connecting this account with some of the existential themes that are present throughout the humanism debate. The initial context for such a connection is provided by the fact that Derrida here discusses Kierkegaard's famous book *Fear and Trembling*, which Sartre also discusses in his lecture. The topic of Kierkegaard's book is of course the Old Testament story of Abraham and Isaac, and the issue with which Kierkegaard wrestles is how one might come to think it right

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for Abraham to obey what he takes to be God's command and deliberately murder his only child, Isaac. For Kierkegaard we confront here a paradox, that Abraham's duty to God could justify 'suspension' of the most direct ethical principle that one should not kill the innocent, and he argues that this paradox can be resolved only through an understanding of the existential significance of religious faith. For Sartre the story has a different existential significance, namely that because we cannot discover authoritative priorities based on 'real' claims of value we have to take responsibility for our own moral choices. Even if Abraham decides to follow what he takes to be the command of God, he cannot avoid the responsibility for his action since it is he who has given this interpretation to his experience (Sartre 1946: 31).

What then of Derrida? The presence of the word 'trembling' in Kierkegaard's title prepares the reader to expect a position which will involve deconstruction; but this involvement will not emerge until the very end. According to Derrida Abraham's dilemma exemplifies the irreducible 'aporia of responsibility' (Derrida 1992: 61). On one side Abraham cannot escape the general ethical responsibility not to kill the innocent; on the other side Abraham owes an absolute, singular, responsibility to God. For Derrida there is no way in principle of escaping this aporia and Abraham's situation is not in principle different from that which we ourselves encounter all the time as we fulfil our ordinary ethical responsibilities while not attending to our responsibility to those innumerable silent others who have no formal call upon our attention but whose needs are just as pressing if not more so. Derrida writes:

> By preferring my work, by giving it my time and attention, . . . I am perhaps fulfilling my duty. But I am sacrificing and betraying at every moment all my other obligations: my obligations to the other others whom I know or don't know . . . (Derrida 1992: 69)

So far Derrida's position sounds broadly similar to Sartre's. But Derrida provides further descriptions of the two types of responsibility here which both connect this discussion back to his earlier work and move beyond it. First, Abraham's general ethical responsibility is described in terms which are clearly reminiscent of the position advanced in *Of Grammatology*. For in this case, where we can justify ourselves to others by language, there are principles which belong to a general ethical system. But Abraham's other type of responsibility, his singular absolute responsibility to God, is described in terms that are quite new; for here Abraham has to be 'silent' and there is no system to which this duty belongs (Derrida 1992: 61). This language appears,

I think, only in Derrida's later 'ethical' writings; and it is developed in *The Gift of Death* in a remarkable way. Derrida interprets Abraham's absolute responsibility to God in terms of 'a secret relationship' with oneself; for 'God is in me, he is the absolute "me" or "self", he is that structure of invisible interiority that is called, in Kierkegaard's sense, subjectivity' (Derrida 1992: 109). So Derrida here contrasts the theme of the inescapable generality of language which was predominant in *Of Grammatology* with a concern for singular 'subjectivity' that is new.

What is one to make of this? Has a humanist metaphysics of presence made a dramatic return in the context of Derrida's ethics? That cannot be right. I think the way to understand this later position is as a repetition, now within ethics, of 'the play of presence and absence'. For Derrida insists that the aporia of responsibility involves an 'insoluble and paradoxical contradiction' (Derrida 1992: 61) and this reminds one of his earlier thesis that 'The concept of the arche-trace . . . is in fact contradictory and not acceptable within the logic of identity' (Derrida 1967: 61). So the 'trembling' of Kierkegaard's title should be taken to indicate that we find here a play of singular presence and general absence. In setting this out, I should add that I am not myself persuaded that acceptance is the appropriate attitude to contradictions, either in logic or in ethics. But Derrida's position, as I have interpreted it here, does make possible a final move which is very attractive. The Kierkegaardian terms in which Derrida describes absolute singular responsibility, as a secret subjective relationship, are irresistibly suggestive of 'authenticity' and once that is seen, it is likewise easy to see how it is appropriate to regard our general ethical responsibility (especially as Derrida describes it) as a kind of inauthenticity. Once that connection is made, the account of our responsibilities as a play of presence and absence is transformed into the thought that our ethical life is an inescapable tension between the demands of authenticity and inauthenticity. So we end up here with a deconstruction of authenticity, and thereby, I believe, the correct conclusion to 'the humanism debate'.

Throughout much of this debate, as we have seen, the predominant theme was a contrast between a 'bad' 'metaphysical' humanism which draws on the values inherent in established practices and a preferred 'existential' 'non-metaphysical' humanism which looks to creative activities as a way of finding value in human life. One of the most striking aspects of Derrida's early work was the implication that this priority might be questioned. For even though existential humanism sought to be non-metaphysical it could easily be represented as guilty of the 'metaphysics of presence', in that it suggested

that through free creative activity one fulfilled the essence of humanity and thereby brought oneself into the presence of being. Whereas, if what is proper to man is, instead, a play of presence and absence, and absence is interpreted in terms of a relationship to practices and systems which help to give meaning to one's life, then we get a different picture, whereby the value of life resides in the interplay between free agency and broader practices which give meaning to individual acts. In Derrida's early work the emphasis falls primarily on this latter point, on the way in which the 'differance' provided by linguistic systems and practices makes possible the meaning of individual speech-acts, and the 'supplementarity' of social structures and practices gives meaning to personal life. It is this emphasis which is redressed in later works such as *The Gift of Death* by identifying Abraham's absolute singular responsibility and contrasting this with the ordinary responsibility which arises from general ethical norms. But Derrida does not follow Kierkegaard in arguing for a suspension of the ethical in special situations such as that experienced by Abraham. Instead he holds that situations of this kind are a common feature of ordinary life and that we just have to find ways of managing the conflict between general moral demands and singular subjective responsibilities on a case-by-case basis.

This conclusion finally puts an end to the choice which frames much of the humanism debate, that in order to escape from inauthenticity, from the passive acceptance of the values inherent in one's situation, one needs to occupy a privileged position of personal authenticity in which one finds from within one's own subjective self-understanding a way of creating a life worth living. As we have seen, the standard complaint about this way of framing the choice has always been that there is not enough content to the conception of authenticity to substantiate the aspiration, attractive though it is, to derive from it alone a conception of a life worth living. The response to this complaint which I take from Derrida is that the choice here is a false one. We cannot make sense of 'authentic' personal responsibility except in the context of 'inauthentic' general ethical demands which constrain the content of our personal decisions. So the very idea of authenticity needs to be deconstructed by acknowledging the internal relationship between the values in play in ordinary inauthentic life and the requirements of personal authenticity. But deconstruction is not denial: here, as elsewhere, it signifies an internal critique which emphasizes the interdependence of alternatives which have previously been thought of as opposed. Thus the achievement of personal authenticity can still be thought of as an essential human potentiality,

but it needs to be set alongside an equally essential human dependence on the ordinary relationships and conditions which provide the context for personal life. What is proper to man is the tension between the general and the personal, the interplay between the inauthentic and the authentic, if we continue to use these terms.

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