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Abstract: In his quest for an ethics, Sartre went from a universalism of a Kantian type (L’Existentialisme est un humanisme) to inscribing ethical action in History, that is, in a dialectics of ends and means (Cahiers pour une morale). This dialectics, here studied in the period between 1938 and 1948, also constitutes the subtext of a number of his literary and dramatic works, where it recurs more insistently than in its philosophical developments: Sartre’s first intuition, contingency.

Keywords: contingency, dialectics, ends, ethics, history, laughter, means, politics

It is very easy to read Sartre without worrying about Kant. Nonetheless, it has gradually dawned on me that, as far as ethics (la morale) is concerned, Kant deeply impregnates Sartre’s thought. While I was working on the ‘original choice’, I came upon a note by Aron in his Mémoires about his petit camarade: ‘Nous avions lu tous deux La Religion dans les limites de la simple raison, de Kant, et médité sur le choix que chacun fait de soi-même, une fois pour toutes, mais aussi avec la permanente liberté de se convertir.’

Following up this clue, it came to seem to me that the Sartrean ‘original choice’, that is, the way a freedom chooses itself in the world, primevally, in a totalising process, has much in common with Kant’s first act of free will (l’acte premier du libre arbitre), ‘existant dans l’homme dès la naissance, sans pourtant que la naissance en soit la cause’ [‘as present in the human being at the moment of birth – not that birth itself is its cause’], and through which freedom orients towards evil or good. The indication by Aron, who had written his dissertation on L’intemporel dans la philosophie de Kant, amounts, I think, to a kind of testimony that reflecting on Sartre’s relations to Kant, at the level of Sartre’s ethics, is not some arbitrary and hare-brained academic idea.

I would like to hypothesise that, at that level, Sartre’s debate with Kant goes beyond the superficial, taking as a point of reference the question of lying. This question is crucial for Kant as everyone knows, but it is also very recurrent in Sartre’s texts. In this article, I divide my argument into three steps. I reflect, first, on L’Existentialisme est un humanisme, to explain my opinion that this text is of Kantian inspiration. Second, I turn to the Cahiers pour une morale, where Sartre, on the contrary, comes across as being rather critical of Kant. I finish my argument by broaching literary and dramatic illustrations of the problem of lying as posed in the Cahiers pour une morale – illustrations which seem decisively to deepen the problem.

L’Être et le Néant ends with a series of pages entitled ‘Perspectives morales’ [‘Ethical Implications’]. Sartre wonders there what would happen were freedom considered a value. Would the result be an ethics of freedom? Or would freedom act as an override (emporterait tout), making useless the very idea of an ethics? He saves the answer for another book, for which the Cahiers pour une morale, precisely, are a draft. In L’Être et le Néant, amongst several – often
trivial – references to Kant, one reference has the feel of an homage: ‘la morale kantienne est le premier grand système éthique qui substitue le faire à l’être comme valeur suprême de l’action’ \(^7\) [‘the Kantian morality is the first great ethical system which substitutes doing for being as the supreme value of action’ \(^8\)]. Sartrre thus gives Kant credit for not pursuing the project of a substantialist ethics, that is, to Sartre, a morale de Salaud. The looming thought that tempts a rapprochement between the two authors is that both try, with a similar demand for radicality, to think an ethics of freedom by confronting difficulties and paradoxes occasioned by the idea of a norm giving itself as freedom (l’idée de la donation de soi d’une norme comme liberté), or of freedom as itself a norm.

I

L’Existentialisme est un humanisme seems to me to be Kantian for three main reasons. First, there is its very topic: the defence of existentialism against its opponent. Second, I have in mind a certain usage of universality in Sartre’s understanding of a free act. And third, one can note a problematic relationship of the work to pedagogy.

(1) Kant, throughout his first important ethical text, namely *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, experiences the strangeness that arises when one claims to adhere to an ethics which takes its principle from good will; an ethics which does not refer to any external criterion, be that coming from the ‘earth’ (i.e. from empirical interests) or from ‘heaven’ (ciel) \(^9\), as in cases of religious precepts and metaphysical theories. Kant’s self-referential ethics, which obeys a Law that is none other than freedom itself, will always be exposed, he knows, to scepticism; it will be attacked by proven ethics (les morales éprouvées) which find their certainties in experience with its causal chains or in metaphysical foundations with their inflexible principles. Thus, the thought that haunts Kant’s ethical writings is that his ethics risk appearing as a ‘transcendante chimère’ \(^10\) [‘high-flown fantastication’ \(^11\)]. *L’Existentialisme est un humanisme* – the text of a talk given by Sartre in 1945 and published in 1946 – has a pretty similar argument, structurally speaking. The aim is to support an existentialist ethics against attacks perpetrated in the name of ‘earth’ or ‘heaven’. On the one hand, ‘earthy’ communists upheld that Sartre succumbs to vain solipsism, making freedom face itself and exempting it from the order of historical and social causes. On the other hand, ‘heavenly’ Catholics claimed that ignoring divine orders and eternal values doomed Sartre’s so-called ethics of freedom to nihilism. Sartre and Kant thus share that they give the word ‘unconditional’ far-reaching dimensions. Freedom is conditioned by nothing. It escapes empirical determinisms and metaphysical essences. It draws force from itself, as its own resource and law.

(2) *L’Existentialisme est un humanisme* seems to me also Kantian in inspiration given its linkage of freedom – even existence – to universality. Everyone knows the first formulation of the categorical imperative: act only according to a maxim that could become a universal law. Sartre, consciously or not, is very faithful to that formulation: ‘[Q]uand nous disons que l’homme est responsable de lui-même, nous ne voulons pas dire qu’il est responsable de sa stricte individualité, mais qu’il est responsable de tous les hommes’ \(^12\) [‘[W]hen we say that man is responsible for himself, we do not mean that he is responsible only for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men’ \(^13\) ]. ‘[N]otre responsabilité est […] beaucoup plus grande que nous pourrions le supposer, car elle engage l’humanité entière.’ \(^14\) [‘Our responsibility is […] much greater than we might have supposed, because it concerns all mankind.’ \(^15\) ] ‘[L]’homme […] est non seulement celui qu’il choisit d’être, mais encore un législateur [some very Kantian vocabulary] choisissant en même temps que soi l’humanité entière […]’. \(^16\) [‘A man […] is not only the individual that he chooses to be, but also a legislator
choosing at the same time what humanity as a whole should be […]'. One could consider also Sartre’s reproduction of the Kantian argument against lying (le mensonge). One knows that, for Kant, lying is the most unforgivable violation of human beings’ duties to themselves. If, according to the categorical imperative, the criterion for the morality of action is its possibility of universalisation, lying is immorality itself. Lying’s universalisation would be self-destructive. It would shatter on an internal contradiction: when I lie, I want the imperative of truthfulness (vérité) to stay valid (since my lie needs to be considered true); simultaneously, I want to exempt myself from this universalisation. When it comes to lying in L’Existentialisme est un humanisme, Sartre objects to the implicit claim made by liars, that they make an exception in their own interest and do not thereby universalise their action:

Beaucoup de gens croient en agissant n’engager qu’eux-mêmes et lorsqu’on leur dit : mais si tout le monde faisait comme ça ?, ils haussent les épaules et répondent : tout le monde ne fait pas comme ça. En vérité on doit toujours se demander : qu’arriverait-il si tout le monde en faisait autant ? […] Celui qui ment et qui s’excuse en déclarant : tout le monde ne fait pas comme ça est quelqu’un qui est mal à l’aise avec sa conscience, car le fait de mentir suppose une valeur universelle attribuée au mensonge, ce qui est impossible.

[Certainly, many believe that their actions involve no one but themselves, and were we to ask them, ‘But what if everyone acted that way?’ they would shrug their shoulders and reply, ‘But everyone does not act that way.’ In truth, however, one should always ask oneself, ‘What would happen if everyone did what I am doing?’ […] Someone who lies to himself and excuses himself by saying ‘Everyone does not act that way’ is struggling with a bad conscience, for the act of lying implies attributing a universal value to lies.]

(3) As soon as the ethical norm (la norme morale) blends with freedom, a problem of pedagogy arises. A philosopher would not be able or even allowed, without contradicting freedom’s fundamental premise, to prescribe anything in the interests of freedom, or to reach at freedom through education, or even to stimulate (susciter) freedom to take ethical initiative. Ethical freedom, under pain of losing itself, must only act from its own resources. Yet, if the philosopher’s words cannot serve human emancipation, would he or she not do better to keep quiet? Kant, as far as the pedagogy of virtue is concerned, is in a permanent bind: he can neither abandon nor consent to such a pedagogy. If virtue could be taught, how would it be different from a set of recipes? And how would it evade what Kant calls heteronomy? A child must learn to walk without the use of supporting instruments, which, while they render walking easier, over time would make the child’s body less able, dependent on such supports (to take an example from What is Enlightenment?). A similarly structured example could be developed in the case of ethical freedom. In The Metaphysics of Morals one can read a dialogue between master and apprentice in which just such a reflection is found: ‘[La] règle [morale] de ta conduite, tu n’as pas besoin de les apprendre de l’expérience ni de l’éducation que tu reçois des autres ; ta propre raison t’enseigne et t’ordonne exactement ce que tu as à faire.' Resonant with this is an anecdote in L’Existentialisme est un humanisme, which Sartre comments on at length. A student of his is prey to an ethical dilemma he wants to share with his teacher: either the student joins the forces of the France libre in London, where, while he would fight for freedom, he can also hope to avenge his brother killed by the Germans, or he stays with his mother for whom he remains the only reason for living and for whom his departure would lead to despair. Sartre, as the Kantian
master, considers that there is no instruction to give. The very fact that this young man has come to him shows that he has already made his decision – the choice to find his master being already, itself, part of that decision-making.22

If, despite these similarities, Sartre believes himself, in L’Existentialisme est un humanisme, to be safe from the shadow of Kant, this is maybe on account of two criticisms – rather brief, I should add – the former launches against the latter. First criticism: Kant still believes in human nature, Sartre repeats again and again. For Kant, Sartre says, essence precedes existence23 – an assertion which, to be sure, contradicts the sentence from L’Être et le Néant I quoted which credited Kant with having established an ethics of action (une morale du faire). Second criticism: Kant’s ethics aspired to be general, formal and abstract.24 It was by no means bound to assist in concrete cases like that of the student who hesitates between love for his mother and his desire to join the Resistance.

Sartre’s criticism is too quick, however. If the categorical imperative says nothing about the content of ends or duties, this is precisely why Kant thinks the question of ethical life calls for a ‘Doctrine of Virtue’. There, virtue would be defined as ‘le pouvoir et la résolution réfléchie d’opposer une résistance à […] l’adversaire de l’intention morale en nous’25 [‘the capacity and considered resolve to withstand […] what opposes the moral disposition within us’]26, a ‘capacity’ which, in turn, tests itself (fait l’épreuve de soi-même) through conflicts of duties, where one duty can limit another, that is, mutatis mutandis, the case evoked by Sartre about his student: for example, the duty to love all human beings can conflict with the unequal distribution of love, in other words, with the fact that ‘l’un m’est plus proche […] que l’autre’27 [‘one is closer to me than another’].

II

These apparently superficial criticisms have a depth which will reveal itself in the Cahiers pour une morale. That does not mean they succeed in striking down Kant as far as his ethical thought is concerned. Sartre is not a specialist on Kant’s texts, nor does he claim to offer an exegetic reading. Rather, the depth of his critique shows that Sartre’s own ethical thought emerges out of real debate with Kant.

Sartre composes his voluminous notes later published as the Cahiers pour une morale between 1947 and 1948. Four or five years have passed since the publication of L’Être et le Néant, two or three since L’Existentialisme est un humanisme. History had suddenly emerged for him, in its very concreteness, in the course of the drôle de guerre. A decade on, the face of History has changed. During the Second World War, the enemy was clearly identified, unequivocally threatening Europa with barbarity. The choices were clear-cut, and their ethical and political dimensions were as one. It was a propitious situation for the heroism of freedom, a situation which sets up the tone of the Essai d’ontologie phénoménologique and is expressed best by a formulation found in a post-war article: ‘Jamais nous n’avons été plus libres que sous l’Occupation allemande’29 [‘We were never so free as under the German Occupation’]. But after 1945, a new process – the logic of the blocs – imposes itself, organising a peace armed to the teeth and haunted by the bomb. Now, barbarity threatens both sides; choices, though inevitable, become blurry and difficult. Politically, Sartre, while he is composing notes on ethics, feels caught in this antagonistic logic. He will soon look back and depict himself and the condition of the day: ‘comme un rat dans une ratière’30 [‘like a rat in rat trap’]. He embarks, with some colleagues, on the adventure of the RDR (Rassemblement démocratique révolutionnaire), a movement calling for a socialist and peaceful Europa allied to neither the United States nor the Soviet Union. In the coming years, Sartre was unhappy and dark; and ultimately, in 1949, his
shared political attempt fell through. But his notion of the universal which weighs heavily in *L’Existentialisme est un humanisme* does not disappear. It gains new gravity due to the difficulties engendered by an actual anchoring in a complex unfolding History: the ways of universality come to be seen as more winding and more painful.

Thinking back on the RDR years in 1954, and his historical and political education in that period, Sartre writes: ‘La contradiction était dans mon être. Cette liberté que j’étais impliquait celle de tous. Et tous n’étaient pas libres. Je ne pouvais pas sans craquer me mettre sous la discipline de tous. Et je ne pouvais pas être libre seul’[^32] [‘Contradiction was in my being. This freedom that I was implied the freedom of all. And all were not free. I couldn’t, without falling apart, bring myself under the discipline of all. And I couldn’t be free alone’]. The unconditional, which is specific to ethics, appears to be entwined, more strikingly than before, with the conditions of History. Action does not appear only as spontaneous initiative but as concrete enterprise (words that recur in the *Cahiers*). The ends of action cannot be detached from their means; a means points to its end and is indissolubly part of it. In a nutshell, Sartre is brought up the hard way. He learns not only a certain realism but also powerlessness – of which the coming failure of the RDR will be resounding confirmation.

In the *Cahiers pour une morale*, the purity of Kant’s thought bears the cost of Sartre’s immersion in the concreteness and impasses of action. The rudimentary criticisms Sartre addressed to him in *L’Existentialisme est un humanisme* fill out as a result, with many passages revolving around the haughty indifference of the Kantian ‘ought implies can’ (tu dois donc tu peux) towards the real world of means and operations. One should, by the way, note the violence of the Sartrean interpretation: Kant is not indifferent to whether or not the ethical is realised; he only thinks that the success of the action is not a criterion of its ethical value (un critère de sa moralité). Kant writes, for instance, in *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*: ‘je comprends par là [i.e. by good will] […] non pas un simple vœu, mais l’appel à tous les moyens dont nous pouvons disposer’[^33] [‘I understand good will, not […] as a mere wish, but as the summoning of all means that are within our control’[^34] ]. Be that as it may, Sartre’s own typical argument on the topic bends in a different direction (his chain of reasoning has, in *Cahiers*, various variants). *Ought implies can*: this is certainly, says Sartre, an analytic truth[^35] – it is part of the very concept of freedom not to be subjected to determinism. But *which* freedom are we talking about? Sartre’s asking of that question expresses a demand for qualification and concretisation which pervades the whole of the *Cahiers*. As he also asks: Which ends does this freedom want by wanting itself? The ‘ontological and analytical’ understanding of Man in the eighteenth century, in which Kant is immersed, made the human being a ‘tout fermé’ facing another ‘tout fermé’: the world. Ends were a priori, separated from the world, resulting from the being of Man: ‘Mais si nous partons de l’être-dans-le-monde, c’est-à-dire du rapport originel et ontologique de l’homme au monde et s’il est bien entendu que l’homme se constitue dans et par le dépassement du monde vers le monde, la fin et le moyen total sont indiscernables’[^36] [‘However, if we start from being-in-the-world, that is, from the original and ontological relation of man to the world, and if it is clearly understood that man constitutes himself in and through surpassing the world towards the world, the end and all its means become indiscernible’[^37] ]. That being the case, freedom is not only the ‘ought implies can’ anymore; it also expresses itself by ‘wanting what you can’ (vouloir ce que l’on peut) – something Sartre had already broached in his article on Cartesian freedom[^38] And, since the human being’s ‘primeval and ontological’ relation to the world is the original choice that I evoked in the early paragraphs of this article – a primeval choice by which a person constitutes him- or herself as no other by solving in a singular way the question of his or her relation to Being – the universality of the means-ends configuration (agencement) is not merely

[^31]: "L’Existentialisme est un humanisme"
[^32]: "La contradiction était dans mon être. Cette liberté que j’étais impliquait celle de tous. Et tous n’étaient pas libres. Je ne pouvais pas sans craquer me mettre sous la discipline de tous. Et je ne pouvais pas être libre seul"
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[^38]: "And, since the human being’s ‘primeval and ontological’ relation to the world is the original choice that I evoked in the early paragraphs of this article – a primeval choice by which a person constitutes him- or herself as no other by solving in a singular way the question of his or her relation to Being – the universality of the means-ends configuration (agencement) is not merely"
concrete but individualised. Hence a very Sartrean formulation of the categorical imperative, and another vision of intersubjectivity and the reign of ends:

[Q]ue le monde ait une infinité d’avenirs libres et finis dont chacun soit directement projeté par un libre vouloir et indirectement soutenu par le vouloir de tous les autres, en tant que chacun veut la liberté concrète de l’autre, c’est-à-dire la veut non dans sa forme abstraite d’universalité, mais au contraire dans sa fin concrète et limitée : telle est la maxime de mon action.\(^{39}\)

[[T]hat the world have an infinity of free and finite futures each of which is directly projected by a free will and indirectly upheld by the willing of all the others, in that each wants the concrete freedom of the other, that is, does not want it in its abstract form of universality but, on the contrary, in its concrete and limited form; such is the maxim of my action.\(^{40}\)]

The universal remains but is henceforth concrete. One can accurately appreciate Sartre’s journey with the universal following *L’Existentialisme est un humanisme* by reading what he writes in the *Cahiers* on lying: ‘Lorsque Kant formule ses impératifs catégoriques, il ne regarde pas une collectivité concrète mais tous les hommes. Lorsqu’il montre que le mensonge […] se détruit […], c’est dans, une supposition d’universalité ; mais si le mensonge est pratiqué à l’occasion par les hommes existants, il ne se détruit nullement.’\(^{41}\) ‘When Kant formulates his categorical imperatives, he does not have in mind a concrete collectivity but all men. When he demonstrates that the lie […] self-destructs […], it is on the basis of an assumption of universality. But if the lie is practiced by men existing on that occasion, it in no way self-destructs.’\(^{42}\) Which seems to imply lying can be justified in some cases.

III

I now come to literary and dramatic illustrations of the ethical problematics I have just evoked – and which are characterised by a dialectics of ends and means, of the universal and the concrete, of ethics and History, of lying and truthfulness; though, it seems to me the texts I am about to resort to go beyond such dialectics. I discuss succinctly *Le Mur*, *Mort sans sépulture*, and *Les Mains sales*. The first text was written before the war. The other two date from 1946 and 1948, that is, from the historical period I discussed above.

I am not the first commentator to note that the short story *Le Mur* re-enacts an argument borrowed from the controversy between Kant and Benjamin Constant on lying.\(^{43}\) Prisoner of the Falangists – the story is set during the Spanish Civil War – anarchist Pablo Ibbieta undergoes questioning and is enjoined to hand over his accomplice and friend, Ramón Gris. He lies initially, saying Gris is in Madrid, knowing his hideout to be elsewhere. His second interrogation comes under threat of execution. Certain he is going to die regardless, the only existential resource which is left to him is to defy and mock his jailers before his inevitable end. He lies once more, sending them to a graveyard, another false lead. Upon the Falangists’ return, to Ibbieta’s surprise, they do not move to shoot him. Without his friend knowing, Gris was hiding in the graveyard.

The events turn out to be an exact transposition of one of the steps of Kant’s argument responding to Constant in ‘On a supposed right to lie from philanthropy’\(^{44}\). The ethical dilemma disputed by Kant and Constant, in a nutshell, runs as follows: I have offered refuge to a friend persecuted by a tyrannical regime; if the persecutors knock on my door, should I lie to them or tell the truth, even if the truth would lead to the unfair death of a person who has sought shelter in my house? In response, Constant attacks Kant’s absolute ban on lying. The position he defends, as he tries to situate himself in a dialectics of the ethical order and of politics – from the point of view of the problem posed, very concretely, by the Terror – can be summarised like this: truth is
allowed only to those who earn a right to it; it should not be delivered to killers working for a tyrant. Kant responds by reaffirming the intangible prohibition on lying whatever the circumstances. Developing the example of a fugitive that the henchmen of a tyrant are looking for, he evokes the consequences of truthfulness. Where the most massive consequence, i.e. a person’s capture and execution, is concerned, Kant argues the consequence is not attributable to truthfulness. Any relation is, in fact, accidental. He then considers other improbable turns of events. For instance, if one speaks the truth, that the would-be murderers will be held back ‘par des voisins qui auraient accouru’ [‘by neighbors [who] might have come’] and thanks to whom ‘le crime aurait été empêché’ [‘the deed would have been prevented’] (one might well ask, in the name of what would these neighbours rebel? After all, in the Kantian system, breaking the established order is no more advisable than lying). It is also possible, if one lies and leads the killers out of one’s house where one knows one’s friend is in hiding, that one’s friend might have left the building without one knowing. The friend might even find him- or herself, by chance, precisely in the place where one has sent the pursuers. One is then responsible for the death. The later possibility is the one put on display by Sartre in Le Mur.

The situation into which Sartre plunges the characters in his short story suggests that, in this controversy, he is on the side of Constant and the adaptation of the ethical imperative to the urgencies of historical events: that is what Ibbieta’s lies would mean. But I do not think this is the last word. In the three texts I am going to discuss, Sartre also invokes a ‘beyond’ of this dialectics of History and ethics. Historical imperatives, linked to ethical imperatives (that is, the means sketching the end [les moyens dessinant la fin], in the vocabulary of the Cahiers) weigh on the consciences of Sartre’s characters. Those characters, in turn, bend to these imperatives: they play History’s game and lose. But, in extremis, a sort of pure and unconditional freedom recoups its outlay and extends beyond History and ethics. This freedom goes hand in hand with some kind of irreducible absurdity and contingency. This movement is not Kantian at all but is actually specific to Sartre’s time and his own philosophy. A same operator is used in the three stories, though in different ways, to indicate this breakaway of freedom: laughter.

Undergoing a brutal interrogation, Ibbieta, telling his first lie, ‘[a] plutôt envie de rire’ [‘wanted to laugh’]. Indeed, while he is doing what he, a good militant, should be doing (i.e. save the life of his boss), the historical and ethical imperatives which he obeys appear to him in their naked absurdity.

On allait coller un homme contre un mur et lui tirer dessus jusqu’à ce qu’il en crève : que ce fût moi ou Gris ou un autre, c’était pareil. Je savais bien qu’il était plus utile que moi à la cause de l’Espagne, mais je me foutais de l’Espagne et de l’anarchie : rien n’avait plus d’importance. Et pourtant j’étais là, je pouvais sauver ma peau en livrant Gris et je me refusais à la faire. Je trouvais ça plutôt comique : c’était de l’obstination. Une drôle de gaieté m’envalait.

[They were going to slap a man up against a wall and shoot at him till he died, whether it was I or Gris or somebody else made no difference. I knew he was more useful than I to the cause of Spain but I thought to hell with Spain and anarchy; nothing was important. Yet I was there, I could save my skin and give up Gris and I refused to do it. I found that somehow comic; it was obstinacy. I thought, ‘I must be stubborn!’ And a droll sort of gaiety spread over me.]

His second lie – leading his jailers to the graveyard – seems to be ‘d’un comique irrésistible’. And the disastrous consequences of that lie (Gris’s arrest) provoke an attack of laughter: ‘Je riais si fort que les larmes me vinrent aux yeux.’ ['I laughed so hard I cried.']
Morts sans sépulture also ends on a burst of laughter. That laughter seems incongruous given the tragedy of the situation – similar to the one depicted in Le Mur but also different. Here, absurdity is present from the start. The Second World War is drawing to a close. Both the maquisards and militiamen know the war is won (or lost, depending on the perspective). Imprisoned members of the Resistance will be tortured for nothing. They are not aware of their leader Jean’s whereabouts. Since their missing knowledge in itself renders them silent, they will never discover whether they would have been brave enough to keep such a secret. Every one of them realises the absurd situation. That is, all but the pragmatic Canoris, who does not want to leave the field of concrete struggle (le terrain de la lutte concrète) and who keeps reasoning in terms of means and ends – asking what is best for ‘the Cause’. A sudden development happens. Jean, head of the Resistance network, is arrested and joins his imprisoned comrades. He has managed to fool the militiamen, however. They do not suspect he is the leader and are soon to set him free. Now the prisoners at last have a secret to keep; their lying can serve a strategic function. Or it could have, were it not still the case that History had simultaneously decided the winners and losers in the war. At this juncture, nothing has meaning anymore. It is only for their stubborn pride that the militiamen still want their prisoners to talk. Jean, before his release, conjures a trick that should, if not save the lives of his comrades, at least shorten their torture. As soon as he is set free, he will drag to the Servaz cave the corpse of a comrade killed during the ambush and slip documents in his pocket to (mis-)identify the corpse as Jean himself. The prisoners need only send their torturers to the grotto and let them take the dead body for Jean’s. But it is not to be Jean who gets the last laugh at the end of the play. Rather, the laughter issues from the mouths of the torturers. Landrieu, head of the militiamen, laughs listening to the BBC. ‘Tu les auras au cul, les Anglais. Ici, dans ce village’ [‘You’ll feel [the English] in your backside, make no mistake about that. Here in this village.’], he says to his subaltern Clochet. Landrieu decides, as a kind of last-ditch last stand, that he will not tolerate his prisoners acting like martyrs and that he, at least, will win the victory of having made them talk. He proposes a deal to the imprisoned Resistance members: if they hand over their headman, they will be set free. Canoris persuades his co-prisoner to divulge the false information just as Jean suggested, for, Canoris says, they need to live for the Cause: ‘[N]ous n’avons pas le droit de mourir pour rien’ [‘[W]e have no right to die for nothing’] (contrary to what happens in Le Mur where passing on false information has a rational, political function). Landrieu, once he gets the untrue confession, stops his laughter and lets himself be overcome with the seriousness of History. He sends his henchmen out on the wrong tracks. Then, on the sly, out of an absurd whim, in defiance of Landrieu’s order, against the order of causes and effects, against the ethical order, Clochet has all the prisoners executed – as he laughs. It is a laughter certainly on the side of the torturers, but it is, at the same time, an expression that stands beyond camps and Manichaeism. His laughter expresses the absurdity where History and its stakes annihilate themselves. It expresses the freedom which mocks ethics as much as the forces of circumstance.

Finally, laughter also punctuates the end of Les Mains sales. The plot is not really that different: once again, everything turns on the meanderings of political action which weave themselves with lies and knot themselves with death. Idealist Hugo, new member of a revolutionary party, is ordered to kill Hoederer, the leader of the party, but whose politics do not toe the line anymore. Hugo becomes Hoederer’s private secretary in order to commit the killing. But he starts being filled with admiration (even a certain filial love) for his target and draws back. How could he now accomplish his mission? The answer comes when he sights Hoederer kissing his wife, Jessica – a kiss which happened by chance and is actually meaningless, though Hugo does not know that. Hugo becomes sick with jealousy and rides that impulse to the completion of
the mission which his rationality prevented him from carrying through. He serves his sentence for Hoederer’s murder. However, as he gets out of prison, the party want him back. Olga, his everlasting protector, interrogates him about the murder and its motives. In a very Kantian way, Hugo feels guilty that his intention was not pure. Olga is relieved: the more trifling the motives, the easier the act is to forget. It happens that Hoederer’s politics, post mortem, are on the ascendant. He is honoured. His murder is attributed to a traitor and Hugo, if he changes his identity and rewrites his past, can be reintegrated into the party. If he refuses, he will be executed, because he remains still a witness for the prosecution. The party thus asks him to obliterate the crime he had had so much difficulty performing. ‘Hugo éclate de rire […] Hugo se laisse tomber dans un fauteuil en riant aux larmes. […] C’est une farce.’57 [‘HUGO bursts into laughter. […] HUGO sinks into a chair, laughing to the point of tears.] […] Oh, this is a farce.”58 One would recall his last words when he opens the door to his murderers: ‘Non récupérable’59 [‘Unsalvageable!’60]. That is to say, finally, that Hugo becomes free of the immersion of ethics in History – or in spite of it.

The denouement of each of the three plots happens in the form of a more or less absurd (aberrant) act expressed in a climax of hilarity. Whim, stubbornness, evasion of historical reasons and their ethical valorisation: Ibbieta’s ultimate lie, Clochet’s disobedience, Hugo’s obstinate claim for the meaning of an act which he could not make meaningful when he committed it. All this happens for nothing. As though the characters, beyond the dialectics of History and ethics, beyond the industrious enterprises they carried out as these beings ‘par qui les valeurs existent’61 [‘by whom values exist’62], ended up at the limits of the human condition – all the characters being on the verge of death – en route to reprise the famous formulation from L’Être et le Néant, ‘L’homme est une passion inutile’63 [‘Man is a useless passion’64].

Sartre wrote in his war diaries: ‘[…] La saisie existentielle de notre facticité, c’est la Nausée, et l’appréhension existentielle de notre liberté, c’est l’Angoisse’65 [‘the existential grasping of our facticity is Nausea, and the existential apprehension of our freedom is Anguish’66]. It is clear those bursts of laughter, devoid of jubilance, embody, with regard to the chain of events, of means and ends, a moment of suspension structurally similar to a moment of anguish and nausea. If one wished to mark the specificity of this strange laughter (as Sartre himself did in order to differentiate anguish from nausea), it could possibly be considered as the existential apprehension of our being-in-History, an apprehension through which we extricate ourselves from this ‘being-in’ at the very moment we experience it, at the very moment in which the trickeries of History, while possessing us, dispossess us from ourselves.

Is this laughter which utters, in relation to historical enterprises, a moment of absolute extrication and pure unconditionality, specific to the 1940s? Let us sum up briefly Sartre’s itinerary during the decade that stretches from 1938 to 1948. He depicts rather faithfully his position towards politics at the time of Le Mur through the character of Mathieu in L’Âge de raison, who is haunted by the Spanish Civil War but nevertheless is bogged down in his nearly apolitical world – resisting his communist friend Brunet’s solicitations and feeling guilty for doing so. The war will teach Sartre that he is immersed in History. But, through his philosophical apprenticeship of ‘historicity’ and the ontological elaboration of a freedom capable of surpassing the most adverse circumstances – a bare freedom which was, of course, called ontically by the situation of occupied France – Sartre seems far from sensing the complexity and terrible throes of historical processes. During the RDR years, whilst claiming political commitment, he can not fully make up his mind, or rather, dreams of a ‘neither … nor’: neither with the United States, nor with the Soviet Union. In brief, Sartre keeps a certain distance from History even as he approaches it.
Is laughter the embodiment of this distance? When, in 1952, Sartre chooses his side, comes to the decision which Mathieu could not make, and becomes a fellow traveller of the Communist Party, is laughter silenced? One might believe so when one reads the retrospective interpretation of Le Mur he proposed at a press conference in 1967, an interpretation that, in retrospect, seems sinisterly and icily serious:

Je considère que Pablo n’est pas suffisamment engagé comme militant. Si on avait demandé à un militant responsable et courageux : ‘Où est Ramón ?’, ce militant aurait répondu, sans aucun sens de l’humour : ‘Je ne sais pas’ parce que la seule consigne qu’il aurait eue, c’est : ‘On ne le découvre pas’. Ramón n’aurait pas été tué, cet homme aurait été fusillé, et nous aurions eu une chose tragique mais parfaitement rationnelle étant donné les forces en présence. Si Pablo s’amuse à cette farce, c’est parce qu’il trouve la situation absurde. Elle ne l’est pas que je sache, c’est une situation de guerre. Il est d’ailleurs excusable, parce qu’il n’est pas formé complètement comme un révolutionnaire.  
[I consider that Pablo is not committed enough as a militant. If a responsible and courageous militant were asked ‘Where is Ramón?’, the militant would have answered, without any trace of humour, ‘I don’t know’, because the only instruction he’d have been given is ‘Ramón shouldn’t be found’. Ramón wouldn’t have been killed, the militant would have been shot dead, and we would have had a tragic situation – but one that is perfectly rational, given the opposing armies. If Pablo amuses himself with this farce, it is because he finds the situation absurd. Though, it is not absurd as far as I know: it is a situation of war. What is more, we can forgive him, because he is not completely trained as a revolutionary.]  

What a lugubrious Sartre, questing for the revolutionary purity of an action’s motives (mobiles), as Kant quested for motives’ ethical purity! Sartre appears as a Kantian turned upside down, who chases the remnants of freedom in an action designed to get rid of them – an action which should be conducted solely according to the opposing armies. Has Sartre really become that Sartre? Is he here denying the type of existential experience expressed in laughter – or in anguish, or in nausea? It is very doubtful. Yes, for four years, from 1952 to 1956, he was on the side of the Communists. With and near them. But never a full-fledged, card-carrying member of the Party. The reservations of freedom do not disappear, even when this freedom tries to give up on itself – its self. This is what is perfectly encapsulated in a sentence from the end of Les Mots, which is the book of a convert to politics, but which astoundingly magnifies undecidability and which bids Sartre’s farewell to literature in the most literary language possible: ‘[O]n ne se guérit pas de soi’68 [‘[O]ne doesn’t get cured of one’s self’69].  

The old ‘self’ to which Sartre resigns as one would to an incurable illness, the self that makes him write L’Idiot de la famille while he is preaching this ruthless militantism, the self in which, one must add, he secretly delights, is constituted by his first violent and inextricably enmeshed intuitions: freedom – which, intrinsically, disengages as much as it engages and commits; contingency – meaningless, which, from the inside, gnaws into any and all meaning; and the necessity of writing – as desirous as the political impact can be and as powerless as ‘the words’ can be against the real (par rapport au réel). Sartre would probably say of politics, as he says of ethics in Saint Genet comédien et martyr, that it is as necessary as it is impossible.

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**Notes**

1 Translator’s note: I would like to thank whole-heartedly Adam Freeman, Kate Kirkpatrick and Juliette Simont for their benevolent and astute advice, revisions and recommendations. Where my translation is concerned, I have retained (between brackets) words used in the original that I found untranslatable, or that had to be differently translated according to the context (e.g. the adjective moral as ‘ethical’ or ‘moral’). I have also chosen to keep the French translations from the German (followed by English translations between brackets), because, in many cases, the interpretation remains, in my opinion, indissociable from the reception (in translation) of an author in the target language – a bilingual or trilingual reader would notice how the translations of Kant, for instance, can be read and interpreted (very) differently from one language to the other. Finally, I have given published translations of the quotations cited, when available; otherwise the translations are mine. I also modified the official translations when they did not correspond to the French, or when I thought they were flawed or inconsistent with mine. – Ârash Aminian Tabrizi


6 This reflection should be expanded by exploring the vast set of writings Sartre dedicated to ethics in 1964–1965. In these texts, references to Kant and the problem of lying are still present, though the limits of the current article do not allow me to examine them.


10 Kant, *Fondements de la métaphysique de mœurs*, 252 (IV 394).

11 Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 17 (IV 394).


25 Kant, *Fondements de la métaphysique de mœurs*, 252 (IV 394).
26 Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 17 (IV 394).
33 Sartre, ‘Relecture du Carnet I’, 948.
34 Kant, *Fondements de la métaphysique des mœurs*, 658 ([VI] 380).
37 Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 744 (VI 452).
38 Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 246 (VI 452).
42 Jean-Paul Sartre, ‘Relecture du Carnet I’, 948.


Sartre, ‘Le Mur’, 34.


Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 627.


Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 636.


