

Faith in Oneself

The goods that can be desired without going to a sufficient human depth are disappointing as soon as they have been used

All the goods that are necessary for life and which are not simply useful or pleasant have one characteristic in common. It is that, although we do not need to take them beforehand to a greater personal depth, we seek them spontaneously as soon as they present themselves to us. In order to obtain them, we are driven to know and to be able to do more and more. Knowledge and ability are loved for their own sake and they also are included among the goods that we seek when we are not harassed by urgent needs or violent passions. Although they are no doubt superior, these goods do not require great inner depths in order to be desired and obtained. All that is necessary is that we should have the means to obtain them when and as we want them.

The search for and the enjoyment of these goods, even the most exalted of them, may exercise our faculties, but will not help us directly to become more deeply conscious, in a more original way, of our own humanity. If they are to benefit us at all in this sphere, we must have begun already to become personally deeper. If this process has not already commenced, this search and enjoyment will preoccupy us and distract us from ourselves, insofar as we are not already sated. Satiety, after all, always puts an end to the often all too brief time of possession.

We strive incessantly toward new goods and their intrinsic interest becomes less and less in our eyes the more we acquire them. In breathing, we take into our lungs the volume of air that they are able to contain and the breathing process continues with the rapid exhalation of that air and further rapid inhalation and exhalation, going on indefinitely. In just the same way, our lives follow a rhythm of acquiring goods and then rejecting them as soon as they begin to disappoint us. It is only by virtue of an inner activity that we can in fact nourish our humanity and make it grow.

These goods distract us from ourselves when we do not go beyond them, with the result that we endure life rather than rule it

As long as we continue to live exclusively at the level of our senses and the enjoyment that they obtain for us and even, it must be stated in all honesty, exclusively at the level of scientific and technical knowledge, the search for which that knowledge calls and the power that it confers, we will continue to be fascinated by what we desire, preoccupied by what we do and possessed by what we possess. Drawn along by the movement which leads us to pursue goods that we will no longer want as soon as we have obtained them, we are more used by life than living. The rhythm of our lives is controlled by the rise and fall of our conquests and failures. We merge into our own history and disappear with it. We pass away with all our interests and all our activities. We vanish with each one of our moments of experience into the void of a past that will henceforward be complete.

We are determined by what surrounds us and what is taking place within. We are also conditioned by what we desire and what we acquire. We are no more than observers of the present, because our expectations of the future and our regrets for the past distract our attention from the moment in which we are living here and now. In a word, we are the place where events jostle against one another. Our lives are only our own in that we are the momentary stopping places of the processes that form them. They are passive rather than active and depend more on our instincts than on our initiative. They never, in other words, reach a really human level. In these circumstances, we are borne along by the rapid current of time together with everything that is not ours, both outside us and within. We are therefore incapable of making true decisions about our actions and successive phases and of adopting a true attitude toward them without regarding them as not belonging to us and therefore without changing their nature.

We may summarize these effects by saying that we are incapable of reaching ourselves in what dwells in us. We are powerless to know, by concentrating all that we have ever been into a single moment, our own fundamental spirit, our inner being that gives meaning and unity to our lives. We are unable to perceive what we are and the beings that we are becoming.

The desire to reach ourselves in ourselves comes from us especially when we are threatened in our essential being

In general and for much of our lives, we are not able to undertake or even to think of undertaking an inner search of this kind or of making any such discovery about ourselves. Nonetheless, although we do not necessarily have to be prepared for the discovery, there are certain exceptional circumstances

in which we may feel an overwhelming need to recognize the contingent and unstable nature of our experiences together with a need to detach ourselves from it and go beyond it.

At such times, this transcendence becomes a radical necessity from which we can only escape by undervaluing the most precious moments of our personal experiences, denying their true nature and abandoning our own humanity. This overwhelming longing for transcendence arises when we are threatened in our essential being. It comes from us and forms part of our being and in it our being leaps up. It is also in striking contrast to all our other desires, even the most powerful. It has its origin less in our will than in all that we are, even if we are not yet fully conscious of it. It has all the vital force of a living being.

Our search to be present to ourselves is crucial in the process of becoming human

In ordinary circumstances and seen in the abstract and from the outside, our desire to detach ourselves from contingencies and to concentrate and keep ourselves in ourselves in order to be present to ourselves seems so strange and unusual that it is at once open to the suspicion of being purely subjective and is therefore often reduced to the level of the dreams in which we seek refuge from our human predicament.

Yet do we not begin to detach ourselves from a life that is instinctive and even more or less developed when, at times of recollection and inner freedom we try, with the help of an inner clarity and an intimate faithfulness, to penetrate beyond our cares and anxieties, even if these are so deeply rooted in us that we are overwhelmed by them, and be present to ourselves? To keep that presence in us, cling to it without being distracted, let ourselves be inspired by the demands that it makes of us and continue to live at the level of consciousness that it requires—surely this is the only way of life that is really worthy of human beings.

Even when we are not seriously threatened, should we not seek this presence to ourselves, which, if it cannot change our whole way of life, is certainly able at least to change our inner climate quite radically? There can be no doubt that the only answer to these questions is “yes.” To say “no” would require a great deal of passionate resistance. Nonetheless, it is rare for us to conform at once and without hesitation to this and to draw the inevitable conclusions from it since any attempt to reach this presence to ourselves is equally rare and very dependent on chance. The intimate approach to this presence, which has to be made again and again if one is to remain present to oneself, can only be discovered personally. It has also to be rediscovered again and again, because its traces disappear again and again. All people must do

this in their own way on the basis of what they themselves are and according to their situation.

As we move closer and closer to this presence to ourselves, by being concentrated within ourselves in a developed form of interiority and aiming at a precise authenticity, it inevitably strikes us as more and more important to reach that presence. It becomes our most fundamental activity. It grows to mature status in us and helps us to become adults. It also helps us to reach in ourselves, in a way that is in accordance with our situation at the time and with a fragility that does not enable us to claim possession, the being which is secretly waiting and hoping there.

Love and parenthood are goods of a separate order, even if they are also desired simply to be possessed

The goods that we are able to acquire by our own efforts cannot satisfy us for long. They can only stimulate us to continue to seek more goods of a similar kind. Hunger makes us look for food. Once acquired, knowledge only raises further questions and leads to further search. Work that has been completed leads to more work to be accomplished.

Other goods, however, also attract us. Unlike those already considered, they are not available to us, even when we have the will to obtain them and the means to conform to them. What is more, we are not exclusively concerned with possessing them, even though we may be looking for them in order to possess them. We are more concerned with the inner core of our being than with the satisfaction of our ordinary needs, although they are closely related to those needs and are in the first place attracted to them. They are not, however, limited to the task of supporting life or bringing pleasure into it.

No, these goods help us to become mature and there can be no doubt at all that their activity is in every sense necessary. Although they are greatly to be desired and are directed more toward the future than toward the present, they are very difficult to define. They also give meaning to an existence that did not seem to need it before these goods were present. They make it fuller than it had ever been in the past and give it forceful movement. Once we have really become acquainted with these goods and are then deprived of them, we often experience a deep languor and feel that what was sufficient for us before we encountered these goods no longer has any real existence for us.

Among these goods are love and parenthood. These are rooted deeply in our instincts, but, as soon as they begin to make themselves felt, they rise up above us. Far from isolating us, overwhelming us, seizing hold of us and fascinating us by the material nature of their object, as the other goods do, they make us open to the presence of the other members of our family, invite us to communicate with them and extend unlimited prospects ahead of us.

In a more general way, all the goods that appeal to us in the most intimate and perfect part of our being and lead us to admiration and creation are of this kind. They are secretly in accordance with our own known or merely potential gifts. They are also able to make us grow in that they come from us and are made for us. They provide us with the opportunity to make explicit what is in us and to make it our own. They also enable us to find our way and to occupy a place that cannot be filled by anyone else near certain beings, far more by reason of what we are than by what we can do or have done, insofar as they make us respond to their deepest aspirations. All this contributes to the full development of our humanity.

All these goods call on us to grow all the more fully as we are even more worthy to reach them and in this way they are distinguished from ordinary goods, in that our possession of the latter leaves us as we were before and even tends to weigh us down. They are very exacting, not only because they demand a great deal from us, but also because they only remain themselves and preserve their effectiveness if we respect their greatness while seeking them.

They are beyond our reach so long as we cannot obtain them without harming what is essential to our human nobility and without irreparably hurting certain other human beings, including especially those for whom we are responsible. In these circumstances, we are unable to reach these goods because we are not humanly in accordance with them, even though we may very much want to be. If we obtain them under these conditions, they would be degraded by the very way in which we obtained them and they would consequently not make us more human, even though they might be of benefit to us at other levels. Indeed, the very action of giving way to their attractions would transform these goods into a form of poison which might lead to failure on our part, however much appearances might point to success.

When, in these circumstances, we can reach neither one nor the other of these goods which we regard as very crucial to our growth nor, precisely for this reason, cease to desire either of them with the whole of our being (in both cases, we do violence to what is essential to our humanity), we are confronted with an absolute impossibility. We are made irreparably destitute precisely because of the potential wealth that is latent within us, but we are not able to seize hold of ourselves in this way. We can only continue in this state by preserving our whole being in a tension that goes beyond what we have and beyond what was at one time sufficient for us, but is so no longer, confronted with what we lack and with what we know to be infinitely desirable, but, in our present situation, irremediably beyond our reach. We must therefore be satisfied if we simply remain upright in the presence of this inability to be what we ought to be able to become under different circumstances. Our reason for existing should simply be the integrity of our humanity. Being human should make us be. Apart from denying ourselves and finally sinking into com-

plete despair, we are driven to exist in the void when we go to the limit of our vision and will. We have, in other words, to exist in ourselves in order to be able to live as men and women.

Not all of us, of course, will experience these extreme times, which are dangerous if we fail in our humanity, but which may be of decisive importance to our spiritual life if we remain true to that humanity. These situations presuppose favorable circumstances, intimate and suitable possibilities and exceptional conditions. In addition, they can only be experienced at depth by the persons whom they really concern. To others they may even seem to be without any power to disconcert or change and even to be based purely on a keen imagination and an acute sensitivity.

They are, however, not so rare as they might seem to be. They are, for example, frequently encountered in the most normal of family lives on the occasion of love and parenthood. They confront the men and women who are sufficiently conscious of their existence with demands that cannot all be satisfied at the same time or they place them in a position where they are unable to relieve the painful burden.

The situation of men and women confronted with a love that is impossible to reach at a human level

It is very good for us to aspire, with the intensity of a necessity inherent in what it is, to a love that is in our eyes infinitely desirable, but at the same time always inaccessible at the human level at which it is first presented. It is not that it is unreasonable to seek this love, since, if it were to be fulfilled at the human level, it would certainly lead to a very real deepening of our existence. It is undoubtedly not beyond our ability to fulfill this desire, either because the initiatives for which it calls are impossible to take or because some absolute value imposes a taboo. If we wish to continue to be worthy of our humanity, we will recognize that we will never be fully in accordance with that love, to which we hope to give the whole of our human reality, but from which we also want to keep all our greatness.

Under the conditions in which we find ourselves, then, conditions which include family responsibilities or other cares which we have to undertake and which we cannot forsake without forsaking and even betraying ourselves, we cannot usually reach that love at a purely human level. We are only able to reach it at a completely different level, one that would do violence to its very nature. If we were to give way to that love, we would have to accept that we would no longer be able simply to seize hold of the shadow of what we had been led to desire with the whole of our being.

We therefore have within us an impotence that is inherent in our humanity, an impotence that is also, for the same reason, the impotence of the

being that is the object of our love. Neither the one nor the other can consent to that love without denying itself, given what they are and having regard to all the serious consequences, with unlimited and irreparable repercussions, for which they would have to accept direct or indirect responsibility. It is also especially true that we cannot grow in our humanity if we trample on and seriously hurt someone else, even if that other person is to some extent responsible. No one has the right to run the risk of doing this, however limited that risk may be and with whatever regrets that risk may be taken.

In this way, we are in contact with the limits beyond which we cannot pass without ceasing to be truly human, even if we were to continue to live honestly. To go beyond those limits would do violence to a certain reality in us and deform our true nature. That love, then, is radically impossible to reach, at least in its full potential. It is strictly incompatible with what may be, taking into account what is, and that incompatibility goes back to our very being.

These fundamental demands, which make this love impossible to reach, although they do not make it meaningless or wrong, confront us with ourselves and give us to ourselves, as soon as we submit to their authority. They separate us from what is merely contingent in us and are indirectly concerned with our essential self. They keep us hanging in the void confronted with what we ought to be and cannot escape from being in view of our knowledge of what we are.

Men and women do not have to deny the inherent value of that love that is impossible to reach and to condemn it, since this would be a betrayal of themselves and they would later, perhaps unconsciously, have to bear the indirect consequences of this in their way of thinking and acting. We take this love, that is condemned to fade but not to disappear, with us into our fundamental loneliness and it bears fruit in a different way. Faithful to our humanity, we "exist" in ourselves. In this transcendence, that is not the result of a detachment or a condemnation, but is the consequence of our faithfulness to ourselves, however, we discover that universal brotherhood and sisterhood which unite us to our companions in their common greatness, a unity which is at the origin of the impossibility of their shared love. That association also unites us to all those who are sufficiently conscious of everyone's human condition and who have achieved sufficient inner control over that condition to have successfully found themselves in themselves.

The situation of men and women confronted with the failure of love and parenthood

It is in accordance with the highest and most worthy demands made by our nature—demands that often seem paradoxical to us—that we should be obliged to live under conditions that are intolerable and yet that we should be

called to hold on to those demands if we do not want to lose all sense of the meaning of our lives. This is so especially in certain married or family situations at times of crisis and in other situations, at all times.

There are occasions when demands are made on us as human beings by those for whom we are responsible and we may then think that we are in practice quite powerless to satisfy them. At such times, we find ourselves deprived of everything that has hitherto seemed most vital to us and we feel crushed by the intolerable burden of the future, which weighs down on us like a tombstone. It is, however, above all at that time that we cannot and should not forget that the essential aspect of our humanity will still be in our possession as soon as we wake from this nightmare, regain consciousness, however little, and escape from our prison.

This essential aspect will, as soon as we become aware of it, keep us upright in the midst of the ruins of our life and will make us invulnerable when everything seems to be collapsing around us. Although we may not know it, it is this essential part of ourselves that will make us stand up again after many days of falling when we feel we are no longer able to live but have to go on.

Later, this part of us will give us back, if not a joy in living, then at least a taste for life. It will dim in our recollection every memory of the destructive moments of the past and even these will gradually disappear leaving only momentary moments of recall. In this way, it is possible for us to come into contact with the foundations of our life that are buried in the firm ground of our origins. We will therefore be able to bear the weight of our own situations and to transcend it. We will already be on the way to fulfilling ourselves. One day, moreover, we will know again the joy of being.

Instead of enabling people to discover their intimate human reality, these crises and failures may be the occasions of their downfall

Frequently, it is not in this sudden way that we question ourselves. Our immaturity, that may continue throughout the whole of our lives, and our chronic failure to achieve inner recollectedness—both of these aspects are magnified by the strength of our desires—hide from us the radical impossibilities that our humanity contrasts with the fulfillment of such passions, beneficial though they may be if they can be fulfilled without being diminished under the conditions in which we are placed.

In giving way to our desires, we deform our natures and reduce ourselves to the level of those who make the ordinary goods have value for them. We also associate them with our embryonic condition and in this way suppress the fundamental contradictions which make them impossible to achieve. As a result of this, we condemn ourselves to not growing as human beings and initiate in ourselves the process of corruption. We do this all the more effectively

by refusing to recognize the degeneration and even the radical failure of what we desire with the whole of our being. We do violence to ourselves by becoming resigned and trying to justify ourselves.

People often succeed in breaking away from the painful and impossible situations which they no longer feel strong enough to endure. They learn to accept reasonably the sufferings and the disorders, together with all their consequences, that their escape might cause. They believe that they are, in so doing, saving their lives, but in reality they are condemning them to be destroyed. They escape from within by abandoning those for whom they know themselves to be permanently responsible, even though they may be able to do no more than simply be available to them. They betray themselves by betraying them, by putting themselves in a position where they cannot respond to what those for whom they are responsible may be persuaded to demand of them in the future, however improbable that may seem to them to be. They follow paths which lead them away from situations for which no solution can be found into fresh situations leading nowhere, so that they lose their humanity in the conviction that they are saving it.

In the long run, however, passivity, weariness, poverty of spirit and the habit of endurance inherited from centuries of misery frequently wear down the goad that urges them to confront the most painful and demanding situations. This goad is often the only means by which they can be made to rise up out of themselves and, if it becomes blunt, they may remain, until they die, caught up in the routine affairs of life and incapable of facing the essential questions.

On the other hand, society protects its members by the practical wisdom that it teaches them in many different ways, both openly and secretly. This wisdom is of necessity very limited, since society is almost exclusively directed toward its preservation. By the many different interests that it encourages in its members—interests which seem to absorb them entirely—and by determining their lives in a way that subjugates them unknown to themselves, society keeps them in a state of tutelage and distracts them from themselves. With certain exceptions, it does not grant them the autonomy and inner understanding that they require if they are to become aware of what they really are. Sometimes too, society even gradually corrupts its members and makes them lose touch with the meaning of their humanity.

Men and women may still be able to discover themselves in themselves by means of a vital leap when their end is approaching

People may, however, still be in a position to reach themselves when old age and the gradual approach of death prevent them from being completely in tune with the world around them and to some degree separate them from the

living. It is at this time that they become aware of the gradual diminution of their intelligence and the slowness and loss of agility precisely in those areas where they were in the past so active. They are also conscious of declining power and mental effort. Their bodies, they know, are now misshapen and stiff. It is now that they realize they are approaching the frontier situations for they note the undeniable evidence, however unconscious they may have been until this time of their true condition. However immature they may still be, they are led to discover the void opening out around them and enclosing them more and more. Despite this, however, it is very important that they should not be depressed and that they should resist this demoralizing state in the center of their being. They should remain alert and accept the loneliness of one who is slowly departing this life forever.

Although they may be lucid enough, men and women are threatened by despair when fundamental crises occur

At critical times, when we encounter an impossible situation that is at the same time necessary to us, despair engulfs us. Cold and silent, it gradually undermines us, draining all substance away from the present and in advance stripping all reason away from the future. When we see our past collapsing around us and we face the emptiness of total loss of meaning, what can prevent us from hating life? We may at such times be tempted to commit suicide or at least to hope that our lives will end as soon as possible. More often, however, we are led to do what is more illusory and less demanding—to seek refuge, or rather to seek flight in distraction and the mediocre pleasures of the moment.

These frenzies are the normal consequences of our greatness. It is in this way that the seed of being that is buried within us is manifested in its special nature. How powerfully it can germinate within us at this point in order to prevent us from functioning normally, when we fail to recognize it!

Fatalism

People can, however, still escape from the harsh grip of despair and refuse to follow the difficult and unknown path that they have to find on their way toward their remaining in control by giving themselves over to fatalism. This perennial fatalism, which has been emphasized by so many religions in the past, allows us to live and die without reaching ourselves. It limits itself to making us endure our fate with infinite resignation that is sometimes molded by pity. It does not require us to be conscious of our human greatness, although it is only knowledge of that greatness that will enable us to submit

totally and yet still blindly to our destiny. It enables us to do without this by substituting for it the acquisition of a poor form of humility.

The modern form assumed by this fatalism, which has been renamed, but is protected by philosophical guarantees, is intellectual revolt against the absurdity of life. This revolt, which is frequently more academic than real, is also not acquainted with despair, even though it sometimes discusses it vehemently. In fact, it feigns despair and draws breath from it. Modern men and women fill this revolt with a noble and stimulating content, because it enables them to dispense with a more personal and demanding search that is not limited to appearances or generally accepted ideas. A happy state of resignation in the presence of the pitiless human condition strikes modern people very often as the height of wisdom. The truth, however, is that when it does not result in a more real and profound attitude, it is no more than a defeat in the guise of a victory for itself and others.

Men and women struggle with themselves in an attempt to assert themselves beyond their experience

Courageous people attempt to avoid the destructive frenzy of distraction in the situations of crisis in which fate has placed them by overcoming the radical incompatibility they cannot change. However, under the conditions in which they find themselves they are torn between the apparent demands and authentic appeals made by their humanity on the one hand and what they owe, in faithfulness, to the best part of themselves and what they really earnestly desire at the moment on the other. We all tend to separate what we are from what we experience. We try to disregard what moves us or what pulls us down so that we can be only what we want to be, quite consistently and unflinchingly. We also try to exist outside time, to situate ourselves within a timeless duration that does not end.

In so doing, we seek to dissociate ourselves from contingency, which is always tending to swallow us up, and to seize hold of us in ourselves, to enter a state of autonomy and to acquire full freedom. We try to be present to ourselves in our own loneliness, transcending all our humanly impossible desires or our humanly unacceptable reactions. In this respect, we are similar to Valéry's Atikté who, in her dizzy dancing, tries distractedly to create a world beyond the one that surrounds her. It is a vain attempt, of course, and the dancer, on fire as she wanted to be, finally becomes a woman again. In such moments of extreme tension, men and women are forced to recognize that they are incapable of being what they want to be and what they are called to be so long as they do not give up being.

This natural impotence and this fundamental will, which are inseparable

bly united at the point at which consciousness of the second leads to consciousness of the first, when they are both grasped in their original simplicity and strength, give rise in us to a blind, vague and incomprehensible expectation that is at the same time also irrepressible. This impotence and this will are also different from all other kinds of impotence and will. We can therefore only be distracted from them when we are once again so taken up with our ordinary mediocrity that we lose sight of ourselves. In its extreme reality, this expectation is an initial approach, made even before it is recognized to be one, toward what is hoping and trying to be born in us with all the strength of something essential. It is in fact such a fundamental expectation that, when we deny it under the pressure of unanimous evidence and requests made on all sides, we have of necessity to make use of a violence that comes from it in order to oppose it.

Will people therefore totally accept this leaping up of their being as a reasonable act, despite its irrational nature? Will they understand, beyond all that is revealed to them by everyday life and contrary to all appearances and all certainties, that they really exist, despite their inability to imagine, confronted with what transcends thought, what this statement really means? They cannot escape from being and can only live as though they were not. Will this leap, despite its improbable and even inconceivable implications, come from them by virtue of a necessity that is so strange that they would do violence to it and change its nature, not without being secretly aware that they were doing this, when they incorporate it into their other goods?

To refuse to take this step into the void is not simply a denial of the origin and the unique quality of this necessity. It is also a fundamental contradiction. There can be no doubt that it is contradictory when people, submitting unconditionally to what they feel and know and is imposed on them both from within and from without, declare that they are bodiless clouds and claim this with all the self-assurance of persons who know and who are. It is better to agree with this contradiction in order to avoid making the opposite statement, according to which we are fundamentally real, despite everything that denies that reality or makes it seem improbable or even unthinkable. This is a choice made in the dark and impossible to defend in the face of everything that is opposed to it, but at the same time it is one that is vital and radically necessary. It is also a choice which goes beyond all knowledge and all ways of making it present, but which is proposed with extreme urgency when we are confronted with the absurdity and the absence of meaning that exist at the very center of our lives.

This contradiction is not only logical but also connected with the passions, because it is not rejected as it ought to be. On the contrary, it is accepted. It is even loved for its own sake, in order to avoid a decision that is known to be essential because it is concerned with everything that people are. It is

true that this decision is a very great one. Human reason can only suspect it if it does not feel itself to be driven back to its limits in situations in which we are placed by virtue of our clarity and which reason cannot completely take into account by limiting itself to its own sphere of activity and its usual concerns. In extreme cases, then, should it not refuse to give way to an easy condemnation of that decision, even though it cannot under any circumstances justify the decision in its own sphere?

However fanciful this decision may seem to be and however strange compared with other decisions, are we not required to believe in its existence? Will we not respond to the need to make it with approval of a kind that is different from all our other statements because it cannot be reduced and does not go back exclusively to our intelligence or our emotions, but uses and transcends them? It is rooted in us, forms an inseparable part of us, is united to the mystery of our humanity and is, in a word, us.

Faith in ourselves

Let us call this statement that we make about ourselves "faith in ourselves." It is the cornerstone of our humanity. Without this faith in ourselves, we cannot emerge from our life or go beyond all those goods which, however necessary they may be, are transitory and ultimately do not belong to us. Without it, we merge and disappear into what is passing away and vanishing, because we fail to understand what we really are. By rejecting ourselves, we deform our own nature. Despite our intelligence, we are unable to go beyond certain evidence that all appearances and all our knowledge present to us and convince us that our nature is fragile and transitory. We are, in fact, irrevocably tied to this evidence, because we cling to it more tenaciously than to knowledge of ourselves. We are subjected to this evidence. We are bewitched by its appearance that is present everywhere. We are also enthralled with the idea of going beyond it in favor of a decision that derives more power from a fundamental refusal than from a positive affirmation. The result is that we deny ourselves.

Without faith in ourselves, by means of a strange paradox that must be, as it were, a final appeal to this faith, every step that we take toward knowledge of our condition is a step in the direction of our own destruction, because this condition seems to us to be more and more indicative of absurdity. With faith in ourselves, however, although lacking the ability to reach ourselves and not even knowing how we could do it, we remain in expectation.

Faith in ourselves is not based on contingency. It is above all a clinging to ourselves when we are confronted with ourselves and when we are a pure and exclusive consciousness concentrated on ourselves, reflecting about ourselves and understanding ourselves. In this essentially very simple movement, we

seize hold of ourselves as fully as we are able. This movement, however, is not within our reach at every time and in every inner state. It is not usually given to us at the beginning of our life. It is rather the fruit, which takes a long time to ripen, of faithfulness to what is best in ourselves in all our inner and outward attitudes and in all the important decisions imposed from within and from without. When this movement is purely ourselves, we can no longer be closed in on ourselves, either by artificially dividing ourselves into two or by projecting our imagination—both of these being no more than childish ways of seeking ourselves by avoiding reality.

Faith in oneself is the unconditional and mature affirmation, which is unlike any other statement, of the human reality accepted in itself and without reference to the past or the future. The only intellectual content of this faith is this plain affirmation.

Faith in ourselves does not necessarily come from the knowledge that we acquire during our life or from the judgment that we bring to bear on it. On the contrary, it precedes that knowledge and judgment and helps them to develop without necessarily imposing them. This vision of the whole reality can even contribute to strengthening that faith, although it cannot bring it about. It even requires us to give way to the initial approaches of faith and to welcome that faith without reservation, if we are to go beyond the stage of a simple list of memories connected by recollection and in a certain sense depersonalized.

The birth of faith in oneself is of primary importance as an absolute beginning, transcending everything that may have been able to contribute obscurely, either from afar or from near at hand, to its preparation. The necessity and the special quality of this faith are revealed abruptly and simultaneously. This very often happens when we encounter our own greatness in experiencing a desire that is impossible, but which is essential to us or when we are in danger of going beyond our depth in some situation from which we cannot escape and in which we refuse to deny the demands made by our own human integrity. In such a situation, we reject the easy option of abandoning ourselves to what would be no more than a ridiculous fulfillment or a final defeat completing the collapse of our humanity. All too rarely, although it might be very suitable for all of us, this faith is only the previous fruit which we receive when we have taken life seriously and have been able to adapt ourselves to it without letting ourselves be drawn along by sociological conditioning, thanks to our inner spirit of concentration and integrity.

This faith is a vital choice and cannot be separated from each one's individuality. As soon as this faith is considered, not as one's own faith, but as that of another, it evaporates in abstract formulae. As in the case of everything that is essential to us, an attempt to give an account of this faith to an-

other person often leads one to doubt it and even to change its nature. If this attempt is not to prove a disappointment both to the one who makes it and to the one who is present and observes it, both have, at the same time and in parallel, to be conscious of this faith in themselves and to cling personally to it.

This faith is not self-confidence

Faith in oneself is very different from the confidence that we may have in ourselves when we succeed in life and enjoy, perhaps with some vanity, the goods that we have acquired. It is not that assurance and security that we experience when the situations in which we find ourselves and the events that occur within those situations seem to us to be favorable. It is not the feeling of trust that we have when our past history, seen from without, appears to provide a guarantee of our future. It is also not the consequence of another person's consideration.

Whereas self-confidence is initial and spontaneous and does not require inner experience, becoming conscious of faith in oneself is an end-result. We can only recognize its special nature when we have powerfully and for a long time exploited all our own possibilities of clarity, uprightness and courage. There is no doubt, however, that faith in oneself constantly tends to deteriorate into self-confidence, since it is, by virtue of the demands that it makes, placed at the extreme limits of one's possibilities.

It is not the consequence of clinging to a philosophical system

When people are imprisoned in a philosophical system, whether they are aware of it or not, whether they are reduced to rigorously following logical thought based on conceptual language and whether they are tenacious rather than really courageous, faith in oneself in the true sense of the term is not possible. An affirmation of one's greatness, in which one is seen in the abstract, doctrinally based and voluntarily maintained, takes the place of this faith and distorts it. Unlike faith in oneself, this assurance is related to the certainty that all have with regard to the purely rational knowledge that they have acquired. It is based on considerations of a general nature, has the solidity that all attribute to these theoretical considerations and becomes a bastion behind which we defend ourselves from everything that calls us personally into question.

This affirmation about our greatness, which we uphold with such conviction, does not derive its strength from essential calls coming from within us, nor is it based on such calls. It is not like the faith which comes from with-

in us when we see ourselves in danger of not being, naked, confronted with nothingness, nor is it like that which is given as we become really ourselves. Not being rooted deeply in us, this affirmation, even if it is adorned with greatness and supported with fervor, only acts from without on our external behavior. It does not change the fundamental and interior spirit, that inspires one's inner behavior.

Faith in oneself and absence of being

Thanks to this faith in oneself, clarity is not obscured by any form of self-defense. What we cannot be, yet have to be in order to exist as human beings reveals to us our absence of being. We are able to look this absence in the face, because seeing it as it is in all its crude reality and beyond both good and evil is something that comes from the greatness that faith in ourselves gives to us. We are able to hear, through our consciousness of this absence and thanks to our faith in ourselves, a silent appeal to being. We can catch a glimpse, in that absence and as it were in a hollow, of the being that presents itself to us.

When we are alienated from faith in ourselves, we may be aware of our condition, thanks to the power of our spirit and our courage, but we are unable to confront this basic absence without totally despairing. In fact, however, in these conditions, this glimpse that we catch of the absence of our being is less tormenting than it ought to be, because it is accompanied by a vague satisfaction mixed with the bitterness of revolt and the assertion of a greatness that is affirmed in negation and built up on nothingness.

In this way, we become conscious of being, but in reverse. It is, as it were, a false replica of the self-consciousness to which we objected previously by giving way without reservation to our impressions and the evidence and certainty that come to us from without and are alien to what we fundamentally are. It is a false replica too of the self-consciousness which would have led us to make our faith in ourselves explicit and to cling to it if we had been strictly and vigorously attached to what was personally essential to us and to what we could only doubt by denying and renouncing it. We paradoxically take our measure and exalt ourselves in any teaching that claims to be sufficiently radical in its nihilism to have an absolute character.

Faith in oneself and an understanding of one's absence of being are therefore closely united and cannot exist apart from one another. The absence of being is the result of a clarity that has been freed from all self-defense and purified from all spirit of refusal and revolt. This freedom and purity can only be achieved by faith in oneself. On the other hand, because this faith in oneself is, in its nakedness, basically a vital decision and a bare affirmation without any explicit content, it requires one to preserve a sufficiently stable

understanding of the personal absence of being. This is fundamentally so that the extreme and very fragile purity of our faith in ourselves should not be degraded.

Those who have both faith in themselves and absence of being within themselves will no longer be completely attached to their goods. Even if they need their services and cannot escape from serving them and being served by them, they will not be enslaved by them. Although we build our lives up on the basis of contingency, we will not necessarily be life's slave, nor will we be buried by it. Faith in ourselves and the absence of being will be for us both the prior condition and the proclamation of our being. Sometimes we will, through them, come to an extreme consciousness of ourselves, if only obscurely. In this ultimate and always ephemeral state, we will cling to the very essence of our being which, from then onward, we will always be able to affirm, even if we cannot perceive it.

Absence of being is not poverty

Absence of being naturally transcends the poverty of "having," just as faith in oneself transcends self-confidence. At the same time, however, a certain poverty, either desired or accepted, is closely related to an intuitive approach to absence of being. This poverty is neither systematic nor even virtuous. By helping our thoughts and attention to become more concentrated, it makes it possible for us initially to perceive this absence of being as a phenomenon that is only noted at its proper level at the very tip of the consciousness. On the other hand, absence of being, when it is correctly perceived, is more able to overcome in us the tyranny of our desires than any form of poverty that is practiced as an aim in itself or as an ascetic exercise. Unlike voluntary poverty, regarded as a technique or an ideal in itself, absence of being neither makes the desires somnolent nor defames them, but measures them and assigns them to their correct places.

It often happens that we are born to faith in ourselves and at the same time accept our absence of being in radical despair, through a collapse of self-confidence or a doctrinally based assurance that has, up till this time, provided us with enough for us and our life. It is a painful birth, subject to every condition and determinism in the incoherence and crudity of events. It is hardly surprising that, in these circumstances, these conversions to humanity bear the mark of violence and suffering linked to a difficult birth. Some deliveries result in scars that are often permanent.

It is, however, possible for us to reach faith in ourselves and to perceive our absence of being, not through crisis and tragedy, but harmoniously. We may be prepared for it in the great stages of human existence—by love, par-

enthood and even the approach of death. The nature of these events and their special appeal make them particularly suitable for this function. If we are fully in accordance with their increasing demands and respond faithfully to them, we will discover this faith in ourselves and this absence of being in peace and real harmony. This state is, however, always difficult to maintain and has to be recovered again and again.