

I

Prologue

1

Heresy is a set of opinions “at variance with established or generally received principles.” In this sense, heresy is the price of all originality and innovation.

In theology, any “opinion that is contrary to the fundamental doctrine or creed of any particular church” is heretical. From the point of view of the churches to which we do not belong—and none of us can belong to the lot—we are all heretics. But more narrowly speaking, a heretic is one who deviates from the fundamental doctrine of his own church, or of the church with which he was previously connected. So understood, not everybody is a heretic.

In law, finally—still according to *Webster’s Universal Unabridged Dictionary*—heresy is “an offense against Christianity consisting in a denial of some of its essential doctrines, publicly avowed, and obstinately maintained.” What keeps most men in “Christian” countries from being heretics in this sense is that they do not publicly avow their disbelief: it is in better taste to be casual about lost beliefs, and a note of wistfulness generally ensures forgiveness. Obstinacy is rare. Millions do not even know that they deny essential Christian doctrines: they have never bothered to find out what the essential doctrines are. In extenuation they may plead that the evasiveness and the multiplicity of churches create a difficulty; but to be deterred by this when one’s

eternal destiny is said to be at stake bespeaks a glaring lack of seriousness. Perhaps Tennyson had this in mind when he wrote in *In Memoriam*:

There lives more faith in honest doubt,
Believe me, than in half the creeds.

I should rather not speak of “more faith” or “less.” There are different kinds of faith, and nothing is further from my mind than appropriating the word “faith” only for what is good. Neither would I redefine heresy, as Milton did in his *Areopagitica*: “A man may be a heretic in the truth; and if he believe things only because his pastor says so, or the assembly so determines, without knowing other reason, though his belief be true, yet the very truth he holds becomes his heresy.” Of the man accused by Milton I approve as little as he did, but I should not call him a heretic. Rather, his faith is that of most of the orthodox. Calvin, for example, said expressly in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (III 2.11) that “the knowledge of faith consists more in certainty than in comprehension.” Still, such blind faith is not the only kind of faith there is.

Some writers reserve the word “faith” for what they *dislike*. Nietzsche said in *The Antichrist*: “‘Faith’ means not *wanting* to know what is true” (635).¹ That fits much religious faith as well as some people’s faith in their wives, husbands, or political parties. Sartre, too, has suggested that faith involves bad faith: “To believe is to know that one [merely] believes, and to know that one [merely] believes is no longer [really] to believe” (69). My parenthetical additions are meant to bring out what, I believe, he means. I know that I merely believe that this is what he means; I am not absolutely certain that my interpretation is correct; but I really believe that it is right. Thus Sartre’s clever formulation,

¹ Numbers in parentheses refer to pages; the editions cited are listed in the Bibliography at the end of this volume.

like so many clever things he says, applies to certain cases only, no less than Nietzsche's epigram, and not to all faith.

Faith means intense, usually confident, belief that is not based on evidence sufficient to command assent from every reasonable person.² Many people assume that an intense belief must be held with a closed mind—that it necessarily involves no longer “wanting to know what is true”—and that any willingness to look with an open mind at further evidence or at objections shows that one's faith is lacking in intensity and therefore not worthy of the name. Thus many a believer plays into the hands of critics like Milton and Nietzsche.

The use of “faith” in the title of this book depends on the assumption that a man who cares intensely may have sufficient interest to concern himself with issues, facts, and arguments that have a vital bearing on what he believes. In sum, there are at least two types of faith, though possibly many more: the faith of the true believer and the faith of a heretic.

2

Why should one present the faith of a heretic in a book? This is not one of those things which “one” either should or should not do; it involves a deeply personal decision. It is fashionable to apply to experts, to ask for proofs, and to suppose that a crucial choice is either right or not, like an angle. But one cannot prove that one ought to have written a certain book, painted this picture, or written that piece of music. In some cases, it would make more sense to say: I had to.

Such constraint does not attenuate responsibility. On the contrary, the decision cannot be charged to a general rule or to

² This conception of faith is defended in detail in my *Critique of Religion and Philosophy*, § 36: “Knowledge, belief, and faith.” Citing one's previous work like this is admittedly an evil—but a lesser one. Lengthy repetitions would be worse; and if one refrains from both one seems utterly arbitrary, as if one considered argument beneath one's dignity.

anything outside oneself. Neither is it arbitrary. To be quite candid, one has to say: this is why I did it, and my reasons seem good to me; if you have any doubts, consider what you would have done in my situation. Perhaps that will lead you to reconsider your own life and decisions.

I was brought up a Lutheran. When I found that I could not believe in the Trinity, and especially not that Jesus was God, I decided to become a Jew. I was only eleven, and my parents felt that I was too young to make such a far-reaching choice. I persisted, and the matter was discussed for months. During that time, Hitler came to power; and now I was told that in view of the persecution my decision might entail I should certainly wait until I was older. I insisted that one could not change one's mind for a reason like that. I did not realize until a little later that all of my grandparents had been Jewish; and none of us knew that this, and not one's own religion, would determine the Nazis' classification.

Later I learned that my grandmother, Julie Kaufmann, had urged her sons to become Christians after her father's death. She did not believe in Judaism and persuaded herself that Christianity was the natural continuation of the Jewish religion and, in Heine's words, the entrance ticket to European civilization. She passionately wanted her children to be respectable, even at the price of conformity. But she herself remained unconverted and was a heretic's heretic who loved to ignore, lampoon, or defy convention. I loved her dearly. My father's father had died long before I was born.

My mother's father, Arnold Seligsohn, would have liked to become a professor of history. In those days, however, no Jew could become a German professor unless he submitted to baptism, as many did. He would not consider such a step, became a lawyer, and eventually an outstanding authority on patent law. After my conversion, we went to the synagogue together for many years, sitting and standing next to each other. In German "liberal" synagogues, men and women were separated, and my mother sat in a different section Friday nights and in the balcony on holidays. When I was small, she had very rarely attended services. As I

learned more about Judaism, I became more and more orthodox; first my brother and then my father became Jewish, too; and eventually my brother and I often went to orthodox services.

There are heretics from resentment and iconoclasts who attack from outside what they never loved. There are also heretics from love who feel grateful to many with whom in the end they cannot agree. Need I add how beautiful Christmas Eve in our house used to be before we gave up celebrating it? The ceilings were high, the tree enormous, the candles real, the occasion full of warmth and love. We even had an Advent wreath suspended from a chandelier and lit one candle on the first Advent Sunday, two on the second, three on the third, and four on the Sunday before Christmas. Later, when we celebrated Hanukkah, the sumptuous Christmas tables became a matter of the past, but there were presents each of the eight nights and, infinitely more important, our religious intensity increased with every year.

The editors of a popular magazine once asked me to introduce an article autobiographically. I related my conversion as briefly as possible; and it was said: he discusses the world's great religions after having tried two himself. Or: tried out. Why not: tried on?

Whether I ever knew Judaism or Christianity, or both, from the inside might possibly be relevant to this book; but if I merely said I did, you might still doubt my word or think that I deceived myself. To prove my point, I should have to cite what I wrote as a boy: letters, poems, prayers. To show something important in this way—about religion, heresy, or how a human being develops—would be worthwhile. But that could not be done in passing. It would take a whole book—an autobiography. I have no wish to write that. I only want to give some idea at the outset in what spirit *The Faith of a Heretic* was written.

Ideally, that should not be necessary. The book should speak for itself. And to say that it was not written in a captious spirit would be futile. But we are all in danger of forgetting that writers with whom we disagree are human beings like ourselves and not merely authors. A writer who is sharply critical of some positions

runs the risk of being more widely applauded or resented than understood.

This book was not written to comfort those who might find my views congenial, nor to shock and offend those whose ideas I question. The ideal reader would engage in a common quest with me; he would be willing to reconsider his views and some of his basic decisions in the course of this quest. To that end it might help if we had some common ground in the beginning—not a common platform but some recognition of our common humanity. It might seem that any reader would take that for granted; but when a writer touches on questions of faith, most readers would rather erect a protective barrier by labeling him as if he were the incarnation of a position.

This book is part of a quest that began before I found fault with many notions that are considered in these pages; and I criticize them not because they do not agree with my current results, but because I encountered them in the course of my quest and found them wanting. It is for that reason that I am asking the reader to go back—briefly, for a few Prologue pages—to a time when I did not yet hold my present views. None of the biographical events matters for its own sake. The point is to show how the quest for honesty might begin—how it did begin—in one man's life. Many a reader must have had similar experiences, similar qualms. The whole point here is to recall these and to establish some common ground of perplexity and concern.

I was seventeen when I entered Williams College in February 1939. I had just arrived in the United States, and my parents were still in Germany. My father had been released from a concentration camp after some hideous weeks, on condition that he leave the country; but he had no visa yet. In March Hitler took Czechoslovakia, and war seemed imminent. A month later, my parents reached London, where they were to spend the war years; but many others I loved were still in Germany, threatened with extermination.

That summer I read Stone's *Lust for Life*, a novel based on van Gogh's life. He decided to live with the miners, to descend

into the pits with them and share their miseries. Then he met Zola, who told him that all this was senseless and no help whatever to the miners. Zola had written a novel, *Germinal*, depicting their wretchedness, though he did not share it; and this book had helped them far more than van Gogh's decision to suffer as they did. There had been strikes, the public conscience had been sensitized, and things were being done. I read *Germinal*. It might be all right to continue college if that would enable me to do some service that I could not do without an education.

This does not explain the choice of philosophy. But who could give a compelling reason for that? I have no regrets about it. If there had been a religion major, I should probably have chosen that; and I took courses in comparative religion, philosophy of religion, and psychology of religion. I had no clear notion how philosophy might enable me to contribute anything, but I loved it. Unexpectedly, I won a scholarship to do graduate work in philosophy. It was the spring of 1941. Hitler had not yet attacked Russia, and the United States had not yet entered the war. Should I try to volunteer or accept the scholarship? My teachers thought the choice was obvious. I did not, but I went to Harvard, determined to finish as quickly as possible. By the fall of 1942, I had almost all the requirements out of the way, but my attempt to finish my thesis in three months failed.

Returning from military service in Germany, in 1946, I felt little desire to go back to the classroom. But in September I returned to Harvard, and in April 1947 I submitted a dissertation on "Nietzsche's Theory of Values." It was a resented requirement, but I could not help pouring my heart into it. By the end of the month, I was appointed an instructor at Princeton. Soon I rewrote my thesis entirely and added a great deal more to make a book of it. Before long, friendly scholars urged me to follow it up with a similar book on Hegel.

Had I survived to write monographs—on Nietzsche first, then on Hegel, and perhaps eventually on Kant? A scholar's life is not necessarily dull. One can train oneself to find excitement in questions of exegesis. In fact, it is far easier to learn to love a life like that

than to enjoy the kind of work most men do. Enjoyment was not the issue; conscience was. There is a haunting passage in William James, in quite a different context, that comes closer to the point, provided only it is read as a challenge not to others but to oneself:

If the generations of mankind suffered and laid down their lives; if prophets confessed and martyrs sang in the fire . . . for no other end than that a race of creatures of such unexampled insipidity should succeed, and protract . . . their contented and inoffensive lives, why, at such a rate . . . better ring down the curtain before the last act of the play, so that a business that began so importantly may be saved from so singularly flat a winding up.

I do not mean to disparage scholarship or painstaking work of a highly technical nature. I should like to think that I myself have made some contributions of that sort, and I hope to make more. Certainly I respect some men who write monographs on other philosophers; but for me right now this would not do. This is a personal matter, and that is the reason for giving a personal account of it.

I was confronted not with a drab life but with the question whether I had become a traitor. Writing on Hegel and translating Nietzsche and Goethe did not help—unless it helped to make me a better writer and added to my armory. In 1958 I finally published a book of a different kind, *Critique of Religion and Philosophy*, and a year later another volume, on which I had been working during the same years, *From Shakespeare to Existentialism*. Critical discussion of the work of others became a point of departure for attempts to develop my own views. Criticism predominated, but scholarship had become engaged.

Soon after my *Critique* appeared, I was asked to write an article for a projected series on religion. There were to be a Protestant, a Catholic, a Jew—and I was to represent a critical, rationalist point of view. It was a ticklish assignment, and the magazine was not a scholarly journal, but one could hardly say: congratulations,

gentlemen, on your decision to present this point of view along with more popular attitudes, but if you don't mind, ask someone else. I stipulated that I must be under no pressure to pull my punches, and that the editors must not rewrite my essay. They did not change a word, but thanked me for "The Faith of an Agnostic." I preferred "The Faith of an Infidel." That would not do: it would look as if, along with two Christians and a Jew, a Muslim had been included. The editors proposed "The Faith of a Pagan." I did not think I was a pagan and, after some further thought, hit on "The Faith of a Heretic."

This book is no mere expansion of that article. It is an altogether new book and deals at length with many questions not even touched in the article. But the title had struck a sensitive nerve. I had not done justice to it. Could one develop the faith of a heretic in less than seven pages in a popular magazine? Perhaps not even in a book, but it is worth a try.

3

There is another, less personal way of approaching this book. "I divide men," said Tolstoy, "into two lots. They are freethinkers, or they are not-freethinkers. I am not speaking of . . . the agnostic English Freethinkers, but I am using the word in its simplest meaning. Freethinkers are those who are willing to use their minds without prejudice and without fearing to understand things that clash with their own customs, privileges, or beliefs. This state of mind is not common, but it is essential for right thinking; where it is absent, discussion is apt to become worse than useless. A man may be a Catholic, a Frenchman, or a capitalist, and yet be a freethinker; but if he put his Catholicism, his patriotism, or his interest, above his reason, and will not give the latter free play where those subjects are touched, he is not a freethinker, His mind is in bondage" (xvi).

It is always tempting to divide men into two lots: Greeks and barbarians, Muslims and infidels, those who believe in God and

those who don't. But who does *not* fear to understand things that threaten his beliefs? Of course, one is not consciously afraid; but everybody who is honest with himself finds that often he does not try very hard to understand what clashes with his deep convictions.

It is therefore popular to say something like this: we are all slaves of prejudice; this bondage is part of the human condition. Every man has his own commitment, and none of these is capable of rational proof. Man is irrational; there are no freethinkers—only shallow people who *think* they are rational.

Such rhetoric sounds profound and fits the fashions of the day. It carries overtones of existentialism and psychoanalysis, original sin and democracy: we are all equal, depraved, irrational, and committed, whether we know it or not. Modesty is so much easier than honesty because it is compatible with sloth.

None of us can say that his thinking is entirely free; therefore, it would be better not to distinguish freethinkers and not-freethinkers. But all of us sometimes make some efforts to break the bondage of the mind; only some are more obstinate than others. Too many give up too soon. Why not encourage such efforts? And what better way is there than publicly presenting a fairly obstinate attempt—not a shining example of freethinking, but the faith of a heretic?

Listing articles of faith, of course, would not do. Articles of faith are meant for groups of people: they are begotten by the need for ritual and mothered by the need for compromise. They reduce the believer to exegesis—unless he denies one of the articles and becomes a heretic. A heretic wants no articles of faith. The point of this book is not to amuse the reader by making an exhibition of my faith, but to make him feel throughout that *sua res agitur*, that *his* case is at stake.

For the same reason it would not do to present a system. As soon as it is granted that the premises are not really certain, not based on evidence sufficient to compel assent from every reasonable person, and hence merely a matter of faith, it becomes simple

for the reader to avoid concern. Worse, it would give the impression that the author's mind is closed on fundamentals, and that he proposes to solve life's problems by seeing what follows from his presuppositions. Nothing could be further from the truth.

What I want to communicate is not a faith that happens to be heresy today, although tomorrow it might be acclaimed as orthodox. I naturally hope that some of my suggestions may be accepted widely in time, but I should not want to win agreement without capturing in prose the struggle against bondage.

The starting point is not a set of premises that I refuse to question. This book is based not on the all-too-widespread will to believe, but on the will to be honest. This is not a presupposition like any other; for, in Tolstoy's words, "where it is absent, discussion is apt to become worse than useless." Indeed, there is no need to say "apt to become"; where the will to be honest is lacking, discussion is wholly pointless.

This is of considerable importance. Sooner or later, when some cherished belief or position begins to appear endangered, many people ask: why is honesty so important? They suddenly talk as if somebody else were committed to honesty much as they themselves are committed to something else. But the will to honesty is no man's prerogative. It is not a starting point that you can repudiate at will. Every book and every discussion presuppose the will to be honest. The man who repudiates honesty repudiates discussion. There is no point in dialogue with a man who does not acknowledge this standard.

In effect, this is generally recognized. Nobody says that he is not at all committed to honesty. Nobody entirely lacks the will to be honest; but most people settle for rather a small share of it. They favor honesty within limits, though they do not explicate these limits or reflect on them. This question, whether we should set limits to honesty and, if so, what limits, deserves discussion. And this theme, like the other motifs sounded in this Prologue, except the autobiographical note, will be developed in the following chapters.

One more motif should be introduced here to avoid misunderstanding, though it, too, requires further exploration later on. It is widely held that honesty requires scrupulousness and an effort to be rational—so far so good—and that it follows that one must try to be scientific and impersonal. This popular inference deserves a name: *the pedantic fallacy*.

The ostentatious use of jargon is mistaken for objectivity; pretension is confounded with precision, and elaborate complexity with carefulness. A lack of ardor passes for a token that one is not arbitrary. Yet neither a lack of passion nor the anxious dissimulation of every personal element is either required or sufficient for intellectual honesty.

An attempt to do justice to our own experience, to the feelings and the judgments tutored by our reading and reflection and discussions—for that matter, even by despair and sleepless nights—can be scrupulous; it need not be. But it is not pedantry that makes the difference. Rather, the single most important factor is a sustained willingness to consider informed objections.

Some philosophic works seem closer to literature than to science. This has been noted by a few men who depreciate logic and favor a blend of intuition and associative thinking. They, too, are guilty of the pedantic fallacy: they also assume a close connection between pedantry and responsible thinking, but renounce both.

A philosopher can fight men's fear "to understand things that clash with their own customs, privileges, or beliefs." He can try to make men more sensitive to other points of view, and to show how an outlook that is widely slandered and misunderstood looks and feels from inside. To that extent, his efforts may resemble literature. What distinguishes philosophy is the sustained attempt to explore ramifications, objections, and alternatives.

A novelist or dramatist may occasionally examine an argument, too; he does not have to; and if he does a lot of this, the result is usually bad literature. For a philosopher, on the other hand, an opinion should never be more than a starting point.

But the study and evaluation of ramifications and objections and alternatives need not be tedious, trivial, or pedantic.

To probe the weaknesses of many popular assumptions, to develop alternatives, and to make one's fellow men more thoughtful is a contribution worth attempting. Obviously, this does not preclude specific contributions to the discussion of such topics as morality, commitment, or theology.

The word "faith" may suggest something diametrically opposed to the spirit of philosophy. The world abounds in strong faiths that prize conformity above honesty, and we are often told that we can never hope to meet such faiths successfully unless we develop a comparable faith on which all of us can enthusiastically concur. We must stop, more and more men say, being so critical. Dissenters should at least have the grace to keep quiet. Criticism is negative, and we need positive thinking; heresy creates division, and we need uniformity; honesty is fine, of course, but within limits—rather drastic limits.

My faith is not that kind of faith. Far from viewing philosophy or heresy with suspicion, I believe that the enemies of critical reason are, whether consciously or not, foes of humanity.

For centuries heretics have been persecuted by men of strong faiths who hated non-conformity and heresy and criticism while making obeisances to honesty—within limits. In our time, millions have been murdered in cold blood by the foes of non-conformity and heresy and criticism, who paid lip service to honesty—within limits.

I have less excuse than many others for ignoring all this. If even I do not speak up, who will? And if not now, when?

II

The Quest for Honesty

5

Philosophy is commonly considered a chaos of abstruse ideas. Even authors of histories of philosophy and professors who teach the subject outline the gradual accumulation of fantastic systems. Another, very different, perspective seems much more illuminating: one may view the history of philosophy as a history of heresy.

Almost invariably, histories of philosophy begin with the so-called pre-Socratics—Greeks of the sixth and fifth centuries B.C., whose writings are lost except for occasional quotations that are found in later writers. Thales, who is said to have predicted an eclipse that occurred in 585 B.C., is generally called the first philosopher. From him an unbroken line of thinkers leads to Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. What these men have in common, and what distinguishes them from the sages of the Upanishads in India, some of whom lived a century or more before the time of Thales, is a truly stunning lack of reverence for the past. The pre-Socratics shared the Indian sages' and the Hebrew prophets' scorn for the opinions of the common people of their day; but they did not counter these opinions by referring to the scriptures or traditions of the past. Far from reading their own views into, or out of, the inspired poetry of Homer, Hesiod, or some other ancient writer, they included the teachings of these poets in their cutting strictures.