Sartre's Last Word on Ethics
in Phenomenological Perspective

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"Noch am Grabe pflanzt er—die Hoffnung auf"
Friedrich Schiller

I. Introduction: A Fresh Start at Seventy-five

When in 1974-1975 Sartre's deteriorating eyesight had made it impossible for him to write and to read, he accepted his fate with an almost serene resignation. So when Michel Contat, in his interview "Sartre at Seventy" asked him whether his handicap did not bother him (embêter) he replied:

Not at all, because no works are completed . . . . I have decided—I say this definitely—that I have said all that I had to say. This decision implies that I cut out all that I would still have to say and which I do not say. The essential is what I have written. As to the rest I tell myself that it is not worth the trouble . . . 1

Now, five years later, in March 1980, one month before Sartre's death on April 15, the Nouvel Observateur published in three successive issues (Nos. 800-802) under his name (par Jean-Paul Sartre) three conversations with his young friend and collaborator Benny Lévy under the titles "L'Espoir, maintenant . . . " and "Violence et fraternité" (for the second
conversation). This ostensibly meant a startling reversal of Sartre's earlier decision. Even more important are the striking retractions of some of his best-known and even notorious positions which these conversations reveal. Furthermore, they announce the plan of a treatise in cooperation with Benny Lévy consisting of a new type of dialogue on "moral thought." No wonder that at the end of the last conversation Benny Lévy sums up the significance of Sartre's new ideas as "You start all over again at seventy-five." Sartre himself during the last conversation expressed the belief that he had still ten, or at least five, more years left to carry out the new plan, instead of the few weeks left. Nevertheless, several witnesses report how anxious he was to hear the first echoes to his announcement.

Can one take this last big surprise of Sartre's intellectual itinerary at face value? In fact, at one point in the conversations even Benny Lévy asked Sartre point-blank: "Isn't it the experience of old age which makes you change your mind?" Sartre's unqualified answer was "No. Everyone treats me as an old man. I laugh at it. I do not feel my old age." But the main reason for taking Sartre's last words on his philosophy seriously is the content of the new texts and their message, particularly in the area of ethics.

What I propose to do here is to discuss merely Sartre's last conception of this ethics as far as it can be established from the Lévy conversations, not any other changes in his conception of philosophy or of politics. First, I want to give some background for Sartre's relationship with Lévy (Section II), who was clearly the main editor of the published texts of the conversations. I shall then put together some information about Sartre's earlier abortive attempts to compose an ethics and his own later explanation of these failures (Section III). Next, I shall present major points of Sartre's final program (Section IV). They will be followed by a listing of some of the unfinished business for this plan (Section V). Finally, in an epilogue, I shall offer some basic criticisms of the new conception and make suggestions for salvaging some of the important ideas in Sartre's last thought (Section VI).

II. Who is Benny Lévy?

We encounter him first as one of the three participants and co-authors of the "discussions" entitled *On a Raison de se révolter* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974) between Philippe Gavi, one of the main contributors