

Puppets' Uprising: Passive-Active Ethics Within the Trap of Play

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*To Veronica,
who knows how to combine play and revolution,
for all her inspiring literal and symbolic actions*

The feminist protest, like any revolt, is essentially a mixture of seriousness and play. Play is essential because of the position of minorities in a patriarchal regime: they never act on conquered territory and, for this reason, direct action never has the greatest power among the forces present: it cannot but come up against a greater power. Playfulness is important in exchanges between feminists, between feminists and other activists, and in developing tools to challenge the existing order (Frey 2021). It allows us to recognize and confront an unjust and violent situation, without letting ourselves be destroyed by it or by raw anger, which always comes up against incomprehension, defensiveness, and the inertia of the system in place. This playfulness unfolds, for example, in the development of memes of all kinds, the use of accusations as self-descriptions, such as in “killjoy feminism” (Ahmed 2023), or the reappropriation of the label “slut” brought up at protests like the *Marchas de las Putas*. Now, such ironic positions concern serious matters and sometimes we no longer have the desire or the strength to laugh about them. Yet the danger of humor and play is that we cannot get out of it so easily. Minorities must thus confront the social injunction to have a sense of humor and “play the game.” The stereotype of the angry, humorless feminist and the infamous term “feminazi” die hard. Further, from an ontological perspective, we must also recognize that play is an essential dimension of existence. So, are we doomed to play even when we would rather not?

This paper takes an ontological and existentialist approach to play to illuminate this practical question. It takes its starting point in an apparent paradox, at least a tension between an ontological and an ethical perspective on play: if we start from the claim – which I will briefly flesh out in the first part of this paper – that play is first and foremost a structure of being, this means that we all play. Whether we want to or not, whether aware of it

or not. We all play, not only in the sense that we are played: indeed, the ambiguity of being obliges us to interpret the world instead of simply discovering what is true and what is not. We also must play roles all the time and are often thrown into situations we did not choose to be in and that we do not completely master (for instance, the role of being a parent, a professor, etc.) but in which we must act and make choices. Yet, play is no longer play when one is forced to play. The ethical and political problem here is the following: if play is an ontological structure, where is the room for maneuver for the subject who wants to challenge the established order? Is it at least *possible* to instigate a breakaway from play within an essentially playful existence, to stand up for serious values, for instance, or to achieve a rebellion that would not be at the same time undermined by ambiguities and counterforces? What are the exact relationships between the play of the world and the activity of individuals? Is it possible and/or valuable not to play? These questions are highly topical, also at a time when play has become a patent and constraining social structure: adaptability, malleability, and distance are encouraged in the covertly highly oppressive society of “coolness” (Baudrillard 1976, 41). When irony undermines everything, every attempt at revolt against this system might be doomed to be re-caught by the latter and turned into a fashionable trend, a logo for an advertisement, pictures on tee-shirts, or badges. Is revolt possible within an ontology of play? This question is exactly, I think, one of the keys to the dispute between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, hence I will devote the last three parts of this paper to their different approaches.

Ontology of Play

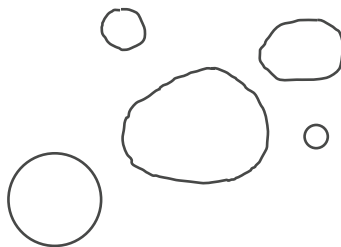
The ontological approach of play is quite a widespread stance in contemporary philosophy. I draw my inspiration in this regard from phenomenology and existentialism.

What Husserl’s phenomenological approach demonstrates is that the being of beings must account for their ability to appear, their phenomenality. Appearing entails appearance, possible illusion. It is impossible to suppose that there is a solid and positive being of things or persons behind their fluctuating appearance. There cannot even *be* (in the strong sense of a substantial being) an Idea of their essence that would define their nature in a perfectly circumscribed and definitive way. Indeed, such

a solid core of being, or such ideas behind appearances, would be *de jure* accessible to a superior divine spirit but: 1) the world would then be absolutely transparent for such a spirit; 2) namely, it would not be any longer a world (a transcendent diversity of beings that do not merge into a pure and simple unity); 3) even more problematic: the very possibility of our points of view, our existences (made of distance, hesitations, mistakes, misunderstandings, foreignness, and opacity) could not any longer find any explanation. As a result of this *reductio ad absurdum*, it must be deduced that beings are their appearing and appearances.

Thus, Husserl points out that there is no true circle – a perfect circle – in the world, only many round shapes and figures. These shapes certainly point toward the possibility to draw more and more perfect circles and to conceive the geometrical idea of the circle so much so that we can also recognize them as being more or less circular. Yet they are only approximately circular, they “oscillate” and “fluctuate” (*im Schwanken*) (Husserl 1954, 22). They are and are not circles, exactly as we are and are not human.

The being of beings must consist of unfinishedness, relative indeterminacy, and hovering. This Being, that Merleau-Ponty, in agreement with Beauvoir, also calls a fundamental and inescapable ambiguity (Beauvoir 1947; Merleau-Ponty 1945, 18) can be, I think, connected to the ontology of play developed by Gadamer, in which play is first and foremost an anonymous structure, like in the expression “play of light,” “the play of the waves” or, “the play of gears or parts of machinery” (Gadamer 1960, 104). “Play” here means an order that is not rigid, though not completely malleable, and that maintains a leeway for different changes and, consequently, launches an indefinite process of to-and-fro movements. Such an oscillation, such a hovering of being, cannot be a displacement from one place to another of a substantial self-identical body.¹ Rather, beings “are” never fully themselves; they point toward other beings (for instance, the round shapes below are and are not circles; each of them points toward other actual or possible round shapes and toward the ideal of the circle). They are outside of themselves.

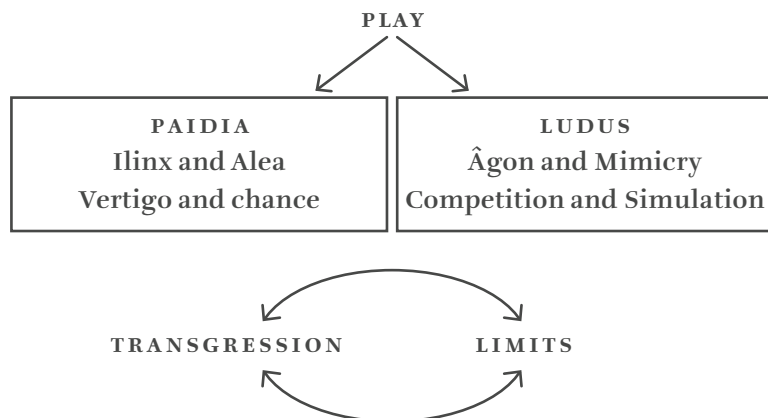


Consequently, the original form of play is to be described as follows: *it plays*. Things are and are not what they seem to be. I have to act in a context and through a body and personal characters that, for a significant part, are beyond my power and my understanding and may always reverse or overthrow my initial project. We are all like Oedipus, Merleau-Ponty argues, and we can always be doing the exact contrary of what we think we are doing (Merleau-Ponty 1947, xxxv). He gives the example of the French supporters of communism before the Second World War who were turned into indirect supporters of Nazi Germany after the German-Soviet Pact in 1939. They “realized that to be a communist is not to play a role one has chosen, but to be caught in a drama where, without knowing it, one receives a different role” (Merleau-Ponty 1960, 31). “It” plays, somehow with us, but, since Being is unfinished, we exist our situation, namely we necessarily enact it and interpret everything.

Hence, I contend, through a cross-referencing of Husserl’s, Gadamer’s, and Merleau-Ponty’s thoughts, that it is ontologically impossible to escape play. But the very concept of play entails that one may stop playing. What is the relationship between ontological play and individual play?

Ontological Play and Individual Play

As shown by Roger Caillois (1958), play always and essentially involves two dimensions: 1) *Paidia* (with a component of *Ilinx*, i.e., vertigo, and a component of *Alea*, i.e., chance); 2) *Ludus* (with *Âgon*, i.e., competition and *Mimicry*, i.e., simulation).



The first dimension, *Paidia*, is predominant in many children's games consisting of scribbling, spinning around, doing somersaults, running madly, and shouting. The second, *Ludus*, is predominant in games with more fixed rules and requiring the training of some skills. However, the *Paidia/Ludus* distinction is relative. On the one hand, even though vertigo is typical for *Paidia*, still, in *Ludus*, a form of vertigo challenges our capacity for maintaining and restoring order and effectiveness: the game consists of putting oneself in a difficult position and dares us to accomplish difficult tasks or imposes especially complicated and uncomfortable conditions in which one has to accomplish a task. *Ilinx* may always win in games. Similarly, on the other hand, in *Paidia*, our resistance and capacity for maintaining pleasure, minimal coherence with oneself, and motor coordination is challenged by an experience that brings us close to chaos: it is challenged, namely, it is *also* an integral part of play.

As a result, *Paidia* and *Ludus* are present in every form of play and games. Play essentially consists of a dialectic between, on the one hand, if not rules, then a principle of order, of self-control and self-integrity, and, on the other hand, vertigo and chaos. More precisely, play consists of mutual transgressions of vertigo into order and of control into chaos. As such, it is a dynamic and fragile equilibrium. Ontological play also involves those two dimensions, which helps us understand what our status as individuals within ontological play entails exactly.

Being is hovering and beings are ambiguous, yet we are not living in a sheer chaos and our structuration of the world is not merely arbitrary. A transcendent *world* is irrepressibly taking shape, some perceptions recur stubbornly, and individuals come to being and keep existing for a while under certain specific conditions (some consistent structures and combinations of characteristics that persist or recur for a certain amount of time). Ontological play *requires* such temporary dams and canals that protect it from permanent and pure instability: without them, there would not be any play.

Our own limitations as living beings require the formation of a certain relatively stable structure: a peculiar body, that is indeed open to the others, but would not live and remain oneself as a pole for perception and action without a distinction between interiority and exteriority, at least without the preservation of some vital norms (e.g., a certain cellular, tissue and anatomical organization, a regulated temperature, a specific chemical balance) but also the relative self-cohesion of a personal conatus: when

they are not respected, then the individual loses its autonomy, its vitality, it shatters and fades away.

Therefore, we are both always unavoidably involved in ontological play and threatened by play. The boundaries that define my individuality and my autonomy may be what is especially tormented by this or that game. The way some people play or the play of the world may be a violence for me. To be sure, within a playful being, the dams that define individuals are not rigid. However, this ontology also entails that such individual limits possess a certain inertia and, moreover, there is a difference between my modification of these norms and enduring their modifications. Although all is play, it still makes sense to claim that being played can be painful and even destructive: people who may like this or that power or social game and blame some of the involuntary or even voluntary partners for their lack of playfulness use a coarse understanding of the ontology of play to their advantage. When I am in a situation of pain, when I feel exploited and oppressed, being told that life is a game or an adventure or that I should grow a sense of humor is lived as a redoubled violence.

It is essential *for the ontological play* – which requires a challenged order – that I also tend to protect my integrity. Ontological play necessarily involves the possibility for players to call for a break in play.

As a result, it makes sense to speak of an ethics of play centered on individual behaviors, intentions, and choices and focused on the problem of violence. However, a difficulty arises: what is exactly our room for maneuver in this framework? Shall we try to institute islets or blocks of seriousness in a globally playful Being? We certainly may decide not to play and to reinforce dams to a certain extent, but this will not prevent us from keeping playing, at a more profound level. And there is a second difficulty: it is impossible to claim that we may find an absolute point of view outside of the realm of play and from which it would be possible to define *good* and *bad* forms of play. Hence the challenge of devising ethics in the absence of solid ground.

Sartre's Ethics of Play in Being and Nothingness

To start with, I will examine Sartre's first ethical stance – although not his last word: precisely an ethics that could be called an ethics of play, sketched in *Being and Nothingness* (1956). It is tempting, Sartre demonstrates, and always possible to identify oneself with this or that *being*: with

my past, my body, my social status, my belongings, etc. This is what Sartre calls the “spirit of seriousness” (Sartre 1956, 641), which leads to the restriction of our possibilities, but also provides a ground for evaluations, social organization, and, more essentially, for the feeling of being justified. In the realm of seriousness, my goals cease to be arbitrary, I gain a function in a system that transcends me. But, as demonstrated by Beauvoir 1947, the main ethical problem of seriousness is the fact that my desire to *be* provides a ground for oppression. To be sure, oppressors possess the actual power to manipulate the situation we are living in, through institutions, language, official culture vehicles, control of lives and bodies, education, and the media, to define in a rigid and apparently objective way what the rules of a legitimate order and the limits of humanity and inhumanity are. However, as an existent being, I have the capacity of distancing myself from the current structure and imagining alternative social organizations. Oppressive structures are never constraining, they need the oppressed to fool themselves and to take such structures seriously.

The “solution” sketched by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* consists of embracing the playful nature of existence and producing works that explicitly give themselves to the other as the basis for playful resumptive. This is what Sartre conceptualizes as generosity. Books, for instance, essentially call for an activity of creative synthesis and do not absolutely determine it. The author offers her work to the readers and the very reality of the book involves these original readings as its integral part. “Play contrasts with and confronts the spirit of seriousness” (Sartre 1956, 626). “As soon as a man apprehends himself as free and wishes to use his freedom [...] then his activity is play” (580).

Nevertheless, there is a tension between this ethics of play and a philosophy of the revolution in Sartre’s later works.

Sartre’s Criticism of Irony and Passive Activity

In the passage of *Being and Nothingness* that I just mentioned, Sartre already points out that “revolutionaries are serious” (580). Precisely, in later works, especially in *The Family Idiot* and in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Sartre focuses on the conditions of an action that could radically break with oppression and class society. Correlatively, as it is patent in *The Family Idiot*, Sartre shows a deep hostility to those whose revolt comes

down to mere irony and who rebel by parasitizing and subverting the self-image they passively received as the role ascribed to them by society.

Sartre clearly emphasizes in *The Family Idiot* that Flaubert's way of mocking romanticism through the scientists' perspective, and vice versa, discourages every praxis and legitimates resignation. Flaubert plays into the hands of the enemy: of a bourgeois society that he hates, but to which he belongs and, thanks to which, he can live comfortably. Sartre shows the considerable limits of every protest action built on irony, and which he calls passive activity, a phrase that denotes a parasitic form of quasi-action that contests oppression from within, by using, in an ironic or provoking fashion, the role built for us by the oppressor. Sartre gives the example of black people who call themselves "negros" as a provocation and claim to turn it into a source of pride.² This strategy is extremely tricky in Sartre's eyes: Flaubert denounces bourgeois stupidity but constantly plays the fool, so that, as Sartre points out, his criticism is ambiguous and he equally suggests that no one can escape stupidity, which deeply discourages any kind of revolt. This passive activity is not, Sartre emphasizes, straightforward praxis, namely open dissent, clear rupture, revolution. In light of Sartre's numerous comments about Flaubert's queerness, on the one hand, and of Beauvoir's analyses of the dangerous proximity between femininity, hysteria, and an immersion in the imaginary field, it may be added that, in Sartre's view, this revolt is not "manly" enough.³ Passive activity, according to Sartre, lacks effectiveness precisely because it does not attack oppression from a new territory, developing new concepts outside of oppressive structures, but from within, using the tools forged by the oppressors: it strengthens these structures of oppression by using them and, in a way, confirming them, and it exposes itself to the risk of being misunderstood, redirected and twisted. Thus, for instance, the feminist Slut Walks and the activism of groups like FEMEN, which use women's nudity or skimpy clothing to protest, somehow feed the media's appetite for pictures of women's naked bodies in order to be heard and they face the accusation of actually reinforcing the objectification of female bodies.

A mode of protest that uses play but which does not exactly "play the game" and tries to change the game from within – by introducing more play, more irony, more distance in the game and wants to make patent that "this is a game" (existence, social roles, serious duties are games) – is also a tricky and dangerous form of protestation. It is what I called a "pup-

pets' uprising": a form of contest that remains entangled in the strings of conditioning structures.

Thus, at some point, Sartre reverts to seriousness: this is especially obvious in his argument with Merleau-Ponty in 1953. There was a political disagreement between them, but Sartre refused to let Merleau-Ponty publish his critiques against him in *Les Temps Modernes*. When it comes to political effectiveness, Sartre claims, consensus, and clear-cut stances must be used to defeat a common enemy: Merleau-Ponty's critiques against Sartre would be turned against them both and the left-wing project they share. In Sartre's words, "you are playing into the hands of reactionaries and anticommunism. Period" (Sartre, Merleau-Ponty 1994). Sartre also reproaches Merleau-Ponty for his timid commitment, for his "dreamy" distant attitude, and his praise for philosophical irony.⁴

Symbolic Action and Revolt

Merleau-Ponty's position in this dispute is particularly interesting in relation to the problem of revolt and play: Merleau-Ponty is both aware of the flaws of passive activity and convinced that it is impossible to exit the game.

Here, Beauvoir's concept of ambiguity, a concept that Merleau-Ponty placed at the heart of his philosophy is crucial. Let us return to Beauvoir's characterization of women as often stuck (historically, yet not essentially) in the imaginary field instead of being engaged in action: Beauvoir's use of the word "instead" ("instead of reasoning, she dreams") is misleading and should be corrected in light of her theory of ambiguity since even the freest activities include a way of being haunted by slimy figures/roles that we do not fully encompass or master. And, reciprocally, there is always a dimension of subversion and nascent perspicacity in the most bewitched enactment of myths and social roles. Hence, the special ability of the oppressed to gain deeper access to the knowledge – both ultimate and yet always unsettled – of oppressive structures as smoke-and-screens systems.

"There are only symbolic actions," Merleau-Ponty writes in *Adventures of the Dialectic* (Merleau-Ponty 1955, 250). "Symbolic action" is a phrase that commonly denotes useless actions incapable of producing an effective transformation of reality: "you may protest, but this will be merely symbolic." Merleau-Ponty acknowledges this aspect of symbolic actions: they are somehow, he emphasizes, weak actions, or could be regarded as

such. And, indeed, it is never possible to fully master the ins and outs of our actions. Merleau-Ponty thus partly integrates Sartre's critiques against passive activity: it is not strongly effective. Revolt is never devoid of ambiguity, and we should always use it with distrust. Here, Merleau-Ponty deflates the traditional positivist practical concepts: action should not focus on clear bases, clear goals, self-control, or blatant concrete effectiveness.

Now, "Symbolic" also means "meaningful." Moreover, if action is *always* symbolic, it is possible to embrace and to deepen its meaningfulness. Merleau-Ponty outlines a new form of ethical and political fruitfulness resulting precisely from the lack of formidability and raw efficiency of symbolic actions and from their focus on meaning.

And, indeed, Merleau-Ponty claims, it is absurd to contrast action on meaning (as merely symbolic) with action on things themselves: The world is intrinsically, in its very flesh, made of meaning, but an unfinished and constantly changing meaning. Actions should "count as much upon the effect they will have as a meaningful gesture and as the mark of an intention, as upon the direct results of the event. If one thus renounces pure action, which is a myth [...] perhaps it is then that one has the best chance of changing the world" (279).

I specified in the beginning of this paper that the meaning in question is always an unfinished and changing one: this is a crucial point, since one may demand meaningful actions without appealing for an ethics of play; the latter is essentially connected with the necessary ambiguity of every meaning.

Indeed, Merleau-Ponty argued that no universal reason can provide unquestionably legitimate values and models. A meaningful action consequently consists of an action that others will actually find meaningful, an action that will inspire their own actions, that they will take over. But the margin of indetermination – or ontological play – in the very being of things, as well as in the subjects' beliefs allows this action to escape pure opportunism or demagogism. Meaningfulness is not reducible to the *actual* persuasion of the majority at a certain moment. Hence, the following five main traits of what we could call a Merleau-Pontian ethics of play as a way of navigating the tension I described earlier, between being stuck in a playful being and the desire to make serious changes happen.

- A First, it is important to pay attention to the singular situation, the institutions, and the anonymous infrastructures from which lines of meaning emerge and through which they evolve. For instance, it is possible to study the slight signs and the fundamental structures that allow us to wager that an event is coming soon or that enable us to seize a *kairos*. Symbolic action involves a significant dimension of critique and hermeneutics.
- B Second, symbolic action is based on the always available possibility to deviate and modify the lines of meaning that are currently forming in things and societies, and, this, precisely through the art of creative interpretation and inspiring expression. Merleau-Ponty emphasizes, in this regard, the difference between, on the one hand, conformist, flat discourses, works of art, and theories and, on the other hand, the ones that were able to become mythical. What is at stake is thus *a ludic critical hermeneutics developed through concrete actions*.
- C Correlatively, symbolic actions imply a full commitment to relational structures. I cannot lean on my own certainty of being on the right track. What is primordial is to strive for the intensification and the maximal openness of an intersubjective quest for a common path, in other words, for meaning. Symbolic action addresses neither an actual factual group, nor the (highly questionable) ideal Human Being, but an imaginary human that is beyond the existing class structures yet still must be built in common, a phantom that helps me aim beyond the actual but does not give me any self-assurance.
- D As a result, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that, even if my concrete project does not convince anyone, symbolic action will be successful if I have advocated this project in a way that reinforces the liveliness of the intersubjective dialogue. The declared vulnerability of symbolic action here becomes its best strength. It deepens the game: subjects become more aware of being played, they realize that there is no clear-cut or stable "self," that people only play roles, but can also modify them. The power of being here and there, ubiquity as the essential characteristic of the ontological structure of play may then be fully seized to facilitate a fruitful dialogue between ironic subjects: these are conditions for the uprising of puppets acknowledged as such and who embrace their being entangled within the tricks and strings of the ontological and socio-historical play. The main interest of the concept of symbolic action lies in the fact that it permits to show that, although passive

activity should always be considered with suspicion, the latter is an essential part of the *profundity* of symbolic actions. Such a profundity becomes the main virtue and replaces the ideal of authenticity. It makes possible a greater awareness of the layers of meaning that are sedimented in history, our institutions, our cultural tools, our concepts, and even our bodies. Correlatively, it gives rise to a concerned, and therefore careful and dynamic, dialogue.

- E This ethics is immanent to the ontological play. It is not born from the application of absolute values to play but from the very experience of the violence implied by the play itself, the desire to go out of the game. This experience gives rise to the *axiological* project to look for conditions for a better attunement between the different players.

Thus, for instance, the debate around Slut Walks and Marchas de las Putas is part of their symbolic success. The term “slut” is a trap for every woman will, at least at some point, whatever life choices she makes, be called a slut or a whore, but reclaiming this term can, for instance, be a form of denial that waters down sex workers’ specific stigma. The term is divisive – and thus furthers oppressive structures by fostering discussions regarding what a good form of protest is and by making all sorts of failures in feminist solidarity possible – but, if the dialogue between sex workers, women who reclaim the word “slut,” and women who advocate a feminism free of patriarchal clichés can take place around Slut Walks, as it in fact does, this symbolic action is as fruitful and revolutionary as it gets. Even more so that every attempt at seriousness will remain stuck in the ontological structure of play and the phenomenology of ambiguity.

The concept of symbolic action allows us to contend that passive activity – puppets’ ambiguous revolt – should never be discredited, despised, or underestimated: it is possible to completely reinvent *effectiveness* – from an ethical perspective – by working and deepening the very structures of this passive activity.

Notes

- 1 Play cannot be a mere third-person structure. Gadamer has the tendency to objectify the ontological play in a way that fails to account for it. "It is the game that is played – it is irrelevant whether or not there is a subject who plays" (Gadamer 1960, 104). See, in this regard, Gregory Bateson's analyses in *Ecology of Mind* (1972): play essentially includes a fictional dimension. In other words, there is "play" when the reference occurs to what *could* happen *instead*. More precisely, the playful nip intrinsically includes the following meaning: "this action does not denote what the action for which they stand would denote. [...] This nip does not denote what would be denoted by the bite" (Bateson 1972, 180). Ontologically, how can such a fictional dimension be achieved? A mere to-and-fro movement in the third-person cannot suffice. There must be a nascent interiority and intentionality, that is the ability of one entity to aim at what is beyond itself.
- 2 See, for instance, the *Universal Negro Improvement Association* created in 1914 by Marcus Garvey.
- 3 Beauvoir explains that the lot of women, in a patriarchal system, is often to imagine for lack of a world that can welcome their action: "Woman struggles with a magic reality that does not allow thinking: she escapes through thoughts lacking real content. Instead of assuming her existence, she contemplates in the heavens the pure Idea of her destiny; instead of acting, she erects her statue in her imagination; instead of reasoning, she dreams" (Beauvoir 2010, 672).
- 4 There is an obvious tension between Sartre's ethics of play and what I have called his return to seriousness. Sartre does not resolve this tension. His concept of "sympathy with communism" was maybe also a way of combining seriousness and play. In fact, existentialists cannot but struggle with some dimension of ambiguity in this respect, as demonstrated in a blatant way by the dispute with Merleau-Ponty: Sartre and Merleau-Ponty blame each other for being too detached, too distant, too deeply entrenched in the imaginary realm.

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