

IF THERE IS A SENSE OF REALITY THERE MUST ALSO BE A SENSE OF POSSIBILITY

To pass freely through open doors, it is necessary to respect the fact that they have solid frames. This principle, by which the old professor had always lived, is simply a requisite of the sense of reality. But if there is a sense of reality, and no one will doubt that it has its justification for existing, then there must also be something we can call a sense of possibility. Whoever has it does not say, for instance: Here this or that has happened, will happen, must happen; but he invents: Here this or that might, could, or ought to happen. If he is told that something is the way it is, he will think: Well, it could probably just as well be otherwise. So the sense of possibility could be defined outright as the ability to conceive of everything there might be just as well, and to attach no more importance to what is than to what is not. The consequences of so creative a disposition can be remarkable, and may, regrettably, often make what people admire seem wrong, and what is taboo permissible, or, also, make both a matter of indifference. Such possibilists are said to inhabit a more delicate medium, a hazy medium of mist, fantasy, daydreams, and the subjunctive mood. Children who show this tendency are dealt with firmly and warned that such persons are cranks, dreamers, weaklings, know-it-alls, or troublemakers.

Such fools are also called idealists by those who wish to praise them. But all this clearly applies only to their weak subspecies, those who cannot comprehend reality or who, in their melancholic condition, avoid it. These are people in whom the lack of a sense of reality is a real deficiency. But the possible includes not only the fantasies of people with weak nerves but also the as yet unawakened intentions of God. A possible experience or truth is not the same as an actual experience or truth minus its "reality value" but has -according to its partisans, at least- something quite divine about it, a fire, a soaring, a readiness to build and a conscious utopianism that does not shrink from reality but sees it as a project, something yet to be invented. After all, the earth is not that old, and was apparently never so ready as now to give birth to its full potential.

To try to readily distinguish the realists from the possibilists, just think of a specific sum of money. Whatever possibilities inhere in, say, a thousand dollars are surely there independently of their belonging or not belonging to someone; that the money belongs to a Mr. Me or a Mr. Thee adds no more to it than it would to a rose or a woman. But a fool will tuck the money away in his sack, say the realists, while a capable man will make it work for him. Even the beauty of a woman is undeniably enhanced or diminished by the man who possesses her. It is reality that awakens possibilities, and nothing would be more perverse than to deny it. Even so, it will always be the same possibilities, in sum or on the average, that go on repeating themselves until a man comes along who does not value the actuality above the idea. It is he who first gives the new possibilities their meaning, their direction, and he awakens them.

But such a man is far from being a simple proposition. Since his ideas, to the extent that they are not idle fantasies, are nothing but realities as yet unborn, he, too, naturally has a sense of reality; but it is a sense of possible reality, and arrives at its goal much more slowly than most people's sense of their real possibilities. He wants the forest, as it were, and the others the trees, and forest is hard to define, while trees represent so many cords of wood of a definable quality. Putting it another and perhaps better way, the man with an ordinary sense of realities like a fish that nibbles at the hook but is unaware of the line, while the man with that sense of reality which can also be called a sense of possibility trawls a line through the

water and has no idea whether there's any bait on it. His extraordinary indifference to the life snapping at the bait is matched by the risk he runs of doing utterly eccentric things. An impractical man - which he not only seems to be, but really is - will always be unreliable and unpredictable in his dealings with others. He will engage in actions that mean something else to him than to others, but he is at peace with himself about everything as long as he can make it all come together in a fine idea. Today he is still far from being consistent. He is quite capable of regarding a crime that brings harm to another person merely as a lapse to be blamed not on the criminal but on the society that produced the criminal. But it remains doubtful whether he would accept a slap in the face with the same detachment, or take it impersonally as one takes the bite of a dog. The chances are that he would first hit back and then on reflection decide that he shouldn't have. Moreover, if someone were to take away his beloved, it is most unlikely that he would today be quite ready to discount the reality of his loss and find compensation in some surprising new reaction. At present this development still has some way to go and affects the individual person as a weakness as much as a strength. And since the possession of qualities assumes a certain pleasure in their reality, we can see how a man who cannot summon up a sense of reality even in relation to himself may suddenly, one day, come to see himself as a man without qualities.