VIETNAMESE EXISTENTIAL PHILOSOPHY: A CRITICAL REAPPRAISAL

A Dissertation
Submitted
to the Temple University Graduate Board

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

By
Hiền Thu Lương
May, 2009
ABSTRACT

Title: Vietnamese Existential Philosophy: A Critical Reappraisal
Lương Thu Hiền
Degree: Doctor of Philosophy
Temple University, 2009
Doctoral Advisory Committee Chair: Lewis R. Gordon

In this study I present a new understanding of Vietnamese existentialism during the period 1954-1975, the period between the Geneva Accords and the fall of Saigon in 1975. The prevailing view within Vietnam sees Vietnamese existentialism during this period as a morally bankrupt philosophy that is a mere imitation of European versions of existentialism.

I argue to the contrary that while Vietnamese existential philosophy and European existentialism share some themes, Vietnamese existentialism during this period is rooted in the particularities of Vietnamese traditional culture and social structures and in the lived experience of Vietnamese people over Vietnam’s 1000-year history of occupation and oppression by foreign forces. I also argue that Vietnamese existentialism is a profoundly moral philosophy, committed to justice in the social and political spheres.

Heavily influenced by Vietnamese Buddhism, Vietnamese existential philosophy, I argue, places emphasis on the concept of a non-substantial, relational, and social self and a harmonious and constitutive relation between the self and other. The Vietnamese philosophers argue that oppressions of the mind must be liberated and that social structures that result in violence must be changed. Consistent with these ends Vietnamese existentialism proposes a multi-perspective
ontology, a dialectical view of human thought, and a method of meditation that releases the mind
to be able to understand both the nature of reality as it is and the means to live a moral,
politically engaged life.

This study incorporates Vietnamese existential philosophy from 1954-1975 into the flow of the
Vietnamese philosophical tradition while also acknowledging its relevance to contemporary
Vietnam. In particular, this interpretation of Vietnamese existentialism helps us to understand
the philosophical basis of movements in Vietnam to bring about social revolution, to destroy
forms of social violence, to reduce poverty, and to foster equality, freedom, and democracy for
every member of society. By offering a comparison between Vietnamese existential thinkers and
Western existentialists, the study bridges Vietnamese and the western traditions while respecting
their diversity. In these ways I hope to show that Vietnamese existentialism makes an original
contribution to philosophical thought and must be placed on the map of world philosophies.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I especially would like to thank my advisor, Professor Lewis Gordon, for working with me through these years and for his helpful advice, courses, and books on African existentialism and phenomenology that inspired me to write a dissertation on Vietnamese existential perspective.

I would like to thank the Ho Chi Minh National Political Administrative Academy Board, the Department of International Cooperation and the Director of the department Dr. Luu Dat Thuyet, the Department of Human Resources, and the Department of Philosophy for offering me the time to complete the doctoral degree at Temple University. I especially would like to thank Dr. Tran Phuc Thang, the Director of the Philosophy Project funded by the Ford Foundation for his support of my study.

I would like to thank the Ford Foundation for providing me the scholarship that enabled me to dedicate full time to the completion of my doctoral research in philosophy. I would especially like to thank Dr. Michael DiGregorio, Program Officer for Media, Arts, Culture and Education at the Ford Foundation Office in Hanoi, who understood how important philosophy is, especially in the context of Vietnam, and who had confidence in my abilities to contribute to the development of philosophy in Vietnam. Dr. DiGregorio’s vision has opened a significant door for me to enter the philosophical world and to broaden my horizon toward the standpoint of Sunyata. My studies at Temple have enabled me to come to a deeper understanding of Vietnamese and Western culture and philosophy. Building on my studies, I hope to be able to contribute to the development of Vietnamese scholarship and the world of practical affairs in Vietnam in the future.

I would like to thank Professor Philip Alperson for his help since my very first step in applying to the Department of Philosophy at Temple University. I greatly appreciate Professor Alperson’s efforts to make my dissertation oral defense a success.

I would also like to thank the Center for Educational Exchange with Vietnam (CEEVN), its Director, Ms. Minh Kauffman, and Ms. Wanda Kraybil for their administrative and educational support that has significantly contributed to my scholarly achievement.

I would like to thank The Center for Vietnamese Philosophy, Society, and Culture at Temple University and Dr. Sophie Quinn-Jedge for their support and their work in promoting Vietnamese studies in the United States.

I would like to thank the Department of Philosophy Temple University for offering its resources and its courses which have helped me to broaden my scholarly horizon. I especially thank Professor J.N. Mohanty for sharing with me his knowledge of and
passion for phenomenology over countless hours in conversation. I deeply appreciate his kindness and generosity. I would also like to thank Professor Joseph Margolis for invaluable seminars on aesthetics and for his kindness. I am also indebted to Professor Kristin Gjesdal who encouraged my passion for philosophy and who generously shared with me her knowledge of Husserl, Heidegger, and Hegel. I would also like to thank my friends and colleagues who have helped me during the Ph.D. program: Phạm Anh Hùng, Tal Corem, Emily Nussdorfer, Dr. Ngô Thanh Nhàn, and Margaret Moore.

Finally, I wish to thank Professor Mary Hawkesworth for all the knowledge I have gained from her through the lectures on social, political, and feminist philosophy and globalization she delivered in at the Ho Chi Minh National Political Administrative Academy in Vietnam. I am deeply thankful to Professor Hawkesworth for encouraging me to rise to my best potential. My gratitude for her is beyond words.

Writing a dissertation on a second language is a challenge. The final version of my dissertation benefited especially from the work of Professor Alperson, Professor Gordon, and Professor Hawkesworth.

I am grateful for the generosity, help, support, and kindness I have received from the professors, colleagues, and friends I have met at Temple University. Studying for doctorate in philosophy at Temple University has been a wonderful education experience for me.
DEDICATION

To Philip Alperson
who brought me to the endless open horizon of philosophy

To Mary Hawskeworth
who nourished the ideas and the writing of this study and who understood the nature of
my project from the beginning

To Cathy A. Barlow and Susan Karol Martel
who were always there for me and who encouraged me to achieve my best potential

To my Parents
for whom my studies have their deepest meaning
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT ....................................................................................................................... iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ...................................................................................................v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION ............................................................................................................. vii</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**CHAPTER**

1. INTRODUCTION TO EXISTENTIALISM AND HISTORY OF POST-1975 VIETNAMESE CONTEMPORARY ASSESSMENTS OF EXISTENTIAL PHILOSOPHY ................................................. 1

2. VIETNAMESE BUDDHISM AS A MODE OF EXISTENTIAL PHILOSOPHY ................................................................. 51


4. WHAT SHOULD I DO? ON REVOLUTION .............................................. 130

REFERENCES ................................................................................................................ 183
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND A HISTORY OF POST-1975 CONTEMPORARY VIETNAMESE ASSESSMENTS OF EXISTENTIAL PHILOSOPHY

Introduction

“Philosophy of existence,” “existential philosophy,” and “existentialism” are all terms used to refer to a philosophy that gained much prominence in Europe during the first half of the twentieth century. Although many of the arguments of existential philosophy are as old as philosophy itself, it became identified as a philosophy primarily through the writings of Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche in the nineteenth century and then in more systematic philosophical form in the thought of Karl Jaspers, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre, among others, in the twentieth. This philosophy examines what it means to be human, to be free, and to be in a struggle with reason in the world, which William Barrett has described as the struggle of “irrational man.” It is the aim of this dissertation to demonstrate that the questions with which all existentialists struggle were also taken up by philosophers in Vietnam both explicitly and implicitly during the pre-colonial years or prior to Western influences.

Vietnamese existential thought is related to existential thought in a challenge to notions of its being an imitation of western philosophy. This effort requires the rejection of European existential thought as the “universal” existential thought. It, as with Vietnamese and other forms, should be considered as one among other kinds of existentialism. What this means is that within each kind of existential thought are universal elements. As European existentialism addressed
problems faced by people in the European world, I argue that Vietnamese existential thought builds, in similar kind, upon problems of existence created by the history of the Vietnamese people and their struggles to assert their humanity with the rest of the world.

Existentialism is a philosophy that examines problems of existence. The word *existence* has its etymology in the Latin expression *ex sistere*, which means “to stand out.” To do such also means “to emerge” and “to appear.” When one “exists,” one comes from indistinction or insignificance and thus appears. The word “existence” also means “to live” and “to be.” Many people today commonly use the word in this last sense to refer to something having being. To exist also means to encounter the contradictory and often absurd aspects of life. For example, as existentialists such as Kierkegaard and Sartre have shown, to stand out means also to stand out to oneself, which also means struggling with oneself as another. As well, much earlier in the eighteenth century, Kant, the German philosopher whose thought organized many of the debates of modern European philosophy of existence, had posed the following problem: Existence is not a predicate. By this, he meant that one cannot imagine existence without the addition of a concept or thing. This concept or thing is not identical with existence. That is one of the absurdities of existence: “Existence” is a concept that lacks conceptualization, at least as a predicate. Existence is, in other words, empty.

The emptiness of existence means that it poses a limit to the scope of whatever tries to capture or contain it. For many existentialists, this means that to exist means to precede conceptualization and essence. As Jean-Paul Sartre famously formulated it: existence precedes essence. For Sartre, and many other existentialists, this meant that there is a limit to every effort to pre-determine human existence. The human being’s determinations emerge after and through the human being’s existence. This makes the human being responsible for what emerges from its
existence, which makes the human being free. This freedom, as existentialists from Kierkegaard to Heidegger to Sartre have argued, places human existence in anguish. By anguish, they mean that human beings face the choices through which they become who they are. The problem of the self is, thus, a major topic of existential philosophy.

According to Maurice Friedman, in his introduction to his anthology *Worlds of Existentialism*, existentialism could be divided into theistic existentialism and atheistic existentialism. Kierkegaard is the father of the theistic line, although similar views could be found in the thought of Blaise Pascal from the seventeenth century. Nietzsche is the father of the atheistic line, although the early Marx’s writings also have existential elements. What is important for our purposes is that existential ideas could come from a religious tradition such as Christianity for Kierkegaard or from a materialist atheistic tradition such as with Marx or the atheistic vitalism of Nietzsche. In *Existential America*, George Cotkin has also shown that existentialism could be found in the thought of the American Puritan Jonathan Edwards. The religious tradition does not have to be Western. In Japan, for instance, Keiji Nishitani has developed an existentialism that brings together Zen Buddhism in critical dialogue with Heidegger and Sartre on the problem of nihilism. The emptiness of existence by itself raises the question of nihilism because just as human beings are free to choose to make their lives meaningful, they could also make the effort not to choose at all or to make meaningless choices. For some people, more is needed than their own choices in order to have a meaningful life. With nothingness before their choices, with no essential or necessary bases for them to exist in the first place, they face or dread nihilism. Nishitani argues that the Eastern traditions, especially Buddhism, have a tradition of more than a thousand years of reflection on nihilism and emptying the self.
In this study, I hope to show that existentialism in Vietnam emerged in a religious and an atheist form. The religious form draws primarily on Vietnamese Buddhism in precolonial times and some of the western Christian influences that developed during the age of European colonialism. The atheistic forms began with Vietnamese existentialists who examined problems of modernization and their impact on moral and political life in Vietnam. To proceed, I will first offer a history of the debates on existentialism in postcolonial Vietnam, especially those that emerged since 1975. I will then move on in the next chapter to an examination of Vietnamese Buddhism and its form of existentialism. The remaining dissertation will be devoted to Vietnamese existential moral and political thought.

Assessment since 1975

Existentialism is largely misunderstood in contemporary Vietnam. First, Vietnamese scholars of existentialism, such as Phong Hien, Do Duc Hieu, Lê Kim Châu, Nguyen Tien Dung, Khai Trieu, contend that existentialism is a Western bourgeois product. Second, all of them intentionally or accidentally make their case through Eurocentric views of philosophy, where they consider European existentialism to be the standard for Vietnamese existential philosophy. Third, none of them acknowledges the roles of Vietnamese traditions in forming a set of Vietnamese existential questions. As a result, they failed to see any contributions of Vietnamese existentialism to Vietnamese thought or to the diversity of world existentialisms.

After the fall of Saigon in 1975, increased attention to the influence of Western existentialism developed among Vietnamese scholars. Many scholars, e.g. Nguyen (1979), Phong (1984, 327), Nguyen (1980), Le (1996), Nguyen (1999, 206), Do (1978, 262), disagree,
however, on many questions concerning the nature and influence of existentialism during this period. Among the most important questions are the following: How exactly did Western existentialism arrive in South Vietnam? What exactly are the tenets of Vietnamese existentialism? Are any features of Vietnamese existentialism distinctive or is Vietnamese existentialism mainly derivative of French and German existentialism? And, finally, what has been the impact of existentialism in the cultural and practical life of the people and institutions of Vietnam?

The Northern scholar Phong Hien is one of the pioneers in scholarship on Vietnamese existentialism with his two books, Văn hoá văn nghệ miền Nam dưới chế độ Mỹ Nguy [Southern Vietnamese Culture and Arts under the American-Nguy regime] and American Neo-colonialism in South Vietnam, 1945–1975: Socio-cultural Aspects (Phong 1984, 327). Phong Hien identifies several manifestations of Western existentialism in Vietnamese philosophy, literature, and practical life. He concludes with a view that dominated this period, namely, that Vietnamese existentialism is a mere imitation of Western existentialism:

Vietnamese existentialism is only a cultural product that was imported, processed, applied differently according to different times, different people constrained by different intentions… They just borrowed, collected, and formalized (existential themes in Western existentialism) into words. (Phong 1984, 66)

Northern scholar and literature critic Đỗ Đức Hiếu produced Phê phán Văn học Hiền sinh chủ nghĩa [Criticism of Existential Literature] in 1987. In this book, Đỗ Đức Hiếu criticized Western Existentialism, including Western philosophy, literature, “irrational” theater, and the Vietnamese version of Western existentialism in South Vietnam, and rejected both Western existentialism and the Vietnamese existentialist literature on the grounds of their being two modes of ideology. He interpreted ideology as a reflection of two economic systems: socialist/communist and capitalist. Capitalism is a backward, anti-revolutionary, and decaying system,
while socialism and communism are progressive, revolutionary, and humane systems. Western existentialism, he contended, is a reflection of capitalist societies and their concomitant backwardness. By contrast, Marxism, as a critique of capitalism and the philosophy of communism, is progressive, revolutionary, and humane. To establish progressive culture and eradicating the colonialist one, the task is to continue developing Marxist thought (Do 1978, 233-234).

Đỗ Đức Hiệu’s argument suffered, however, from some clear shortcomings, the most obvious of which is that Marxism is a Western philosophical and economic critique of capitalism developed in the nineteenth century. Additionally, his discussion failed to mention that there are Marxist existential philosophies, as found in the thought of Jean-Paul Sartre and Frantz Fanon, among others.

Đỗ Đức Hiệu also asserted that the Vietnamese version of Western existentialism was a product of American colonialism. “Western existentialism,” he wrote, “was imported into Vietnam under the American occupation in South Vietnam” (Do 1978, 19). It is true that Western religious existentialism was first introduced in textbooks and journals such as Đại học, Bách Khoa, and Sáng tạo to South Vietnam during the 1950s by Vietnamese Catholic intellectuals (Le 1996, 84-100). Since 1960, Western existentialism was introduced systematically in Bách khoa and university textbooks. Existentialism had spread widely, especially after the fall of Ngo Dinh Diem's government (1963), in Vietnam during the downfall of the American occupation of the country (Phong 1984, 103). However, the relationship between the American colonization in Vietnam and the spreading of Western existentialism in the country is, I hope to show, a more complicated one.
By contrast, Nguyen Van Trung, in one of his unpublished papers “Nhận vấn đề chủ nghĩa hiện sinh, minh xác một vài điều về sự du nhập và phổ biến những trở lưu tự trường Tây phương vào Việt Nam trước năm 1975” [Proving Several Points on the Import and Introduction Western Schools of Thought in Vietnam Before 1975 through the Case of Existentialism], written in 1980, argued that American neo-colonialism did not aim to indoctrinate existentialism to the Vietnamese but instead aimed to develop liberalism, especially classical liberalism, through which all kinds of philosophies, ideologies, and theories were also cultivated in South Vietnam. Nguyen Van Trung argues that the Americans regarded existentialism as a European philosophy and at times even un-American product (Nguyen 1979-1980, 5).

The story of philosophical influence is different, however, with the French, whose society offered the most celebrated exemplars of European existential thought. The French had aimed to introduce their culture to the elite Vietnamese classes with an emphasis on Vietnamese intellectuals in the educational system and high-culture publications, while the Americans focused on the masses of the Vietnamese via mass media such as television, cinema, popular music, and magazines (Nguyen Van Trung 4). Joint United States Public Affairs (JUSPAO) funded South Vietnamese ministry of culture and information US$ 5,400,000 from 1965-1971. And South Vietnamese television and communication division received US$ 20,000,000 during these years (Lữ 1981, 40-41). They created an image in the Vietnamese that the U.S. was a "land of hope" [đất hứa]. This approach made the use of philosophy unnecessary (Nguyen 1979-1980, 3-5).

Lu Phuong in his book Cuộc xâm lăng Văn hoá Tự trường của Đế quốc Mỹ tại miền Nam Việt Nam [The Cultural and Ideological Invasion of American Imperialism in South Vietnam] agreed with Nguyen by also arguing that American neo-colonialism’s main focus was the
rejection of Marxism through the introduction of American culture and capitalist ideology (Lữ 1981, 5-7). But he disagrees with Nguyen Van Trung on the link between neo-American colonialism and Western existentialism in South Vietnam. The Americans, Lu Phuong claims, aimed at Westernization, in addition to Americanization, which included the introduction of existentialism into South Vietnam. He pointed out that the Americans also aimed to influence professional scholars, which meant affecting scholarly journals, such as Sáng tạo, Hiện Đại, and Thế Kỷ 20, which received grants from the U.S. Western existentialism was popular at the time and was discussed in American-funded scholarly and literary journals in Vietnam.

There were, however, scholarly publications that challenged colonial indoctrination. For example, the journal Hành trình [The Journey] edited by Nguyen Van Trung, was banned by the American-supported South Vietnamese government in 1966. The reason was that this journal published articles that argued for a social revolution in Vietnam. The South Vietnamese government had also taken a policy against existentialism on the grounds that, through its emphasis on personal choice, it dissuaded the young from fighting against communism from North Vietnam and the American invasion in the South (Nguyen 1979-1980, 5-6). Additionally, Nguyen Van Trung argued that one main reason that French existentialism was introduced widely in Vietnam after 1954, when the French were defeated there, was not out of a plot of Western acculturation but because most Vietnamese intellectuals at the time were educated under the French educational system. French culture still influences Vietnamese culture via those Vietnamese intellectuals:

Until April 30, 1975 French culture still dominated among Vietnamese intellectuals living in big cities in South Vietnam. French books and journals were dominated in educational system (universities, high schools, foreign schools, Vietnamese schools with French curriculum etc.) Most Vietnamese professors, teachers, editors, scholars, writers, and translators were educated by schools influenced by French culture either in Vietnam or abroad. In addition, there were a group of French professors at French Culture
Division [Phái bộ Văn hoá Pháp] who taught literature and philosophy in high schools and universities. (Nguyen 1979-1980, 2)

Why did the critics of existentialism argue for a necessary “inner link” (Do 1978, 260) between Western existentialism and American neo-colonialism in South Vietnam while existentialism was not generally known as a product of the United States? In fact, the idea of American existentialism did not make its way into American academic culture until the 1990s into more recent times, where scholars have read existential themes from the American past in the thought of religious thinkers such as Jonathan Edwards in the seventeenth century and Howard Thurman in the twentieth (cf. George Cotkin 2003; Lewis Gordon 2008). In addition, existential freedom as one of the core existential themes may encourage people to choose what they prefer without one single standard. Consequently, if one takes Western existentialism seriously, one would always critically examine any existing theories before one makes a political choice. The situation for some Vietnamese existentialists in South Vietnam was, however, difficult for several reasons. First, it was difficult for them to live in the South and completely reject the ideology of the government by following Marxism and acting as a communist if they did not join the National Liberation Front. On the other hand, the Northern Marxists had labeled “existentialism” as bad and counter-revolutionary. Nguyen Van Trung seems to have been in that situation. In his later works, published in the journal Hành trình, he rejected the colonial social structure of South Vietnam, addressed limits of the theory and the actuality of socialism, and argued for a non-communist social revolution in the South. He was welcomed neither by the Saigon governments (e.g., his journal was banned by the South Vietnamese government) nor by the Northern communists. This could be a reason that existentialism was rejected in both the north and the South. The situation some Vietnamese existentialists lived through contradicts the claim of a necessary link between existentialism and American neo-colonialism. Their
experience suggests a third possibility: that their choice was neither liberalism nor communism (e.g., Hành trình group). This group includes thinkers such as Nguyen Van Trung and Lý Chánh Trung. Nguyen Van Trung explicitly considered himself an existential thinker and was recognized by his contemporaries and younger generations of Vietnamese scholars as the core figure of Vietnamese existential philosophy. After 1963, with the increasing occupation of American troops in Vietnam, Nguyen Van Trung wrote many political existential works such as We as Problem (1970), Nguời trí thức vòng bàn [Vietnamese intellectuals losing consciousness] (1963) that revealed the colonized nature of South Vietnam’s society and argued for a social revolution in South Vietnam that aims to change the society’s violent social structure. He also rejected the South Vietnamese ruling class, who sided with the American army and betrayed the Vietnamese people’s interests. In his later works, Nguyen Van Trung clearly rejected liberalism and American neo-colonialism in South Vietnam. Similarly, in Cách mạng và đạo đức [Revolution and Morality], "Lá bài cuối cùng ở miền Nam" [The Last Card in South Vietnam], "Cách mạng và dân chủ" [Revolution and Democracy], "Cách mạng cho người nghèo" [revolution for the Poor] while embracing existentialists’ open morality, Lý Chánh Trung rejected both communism and American liberalism as ideologies to guide a new society in South Vietnam. Nguyen Van Trung considered both communism and liberalism “invaders” from the perspective of Southern Vietnamese intellectuals, preferring individual and national independence and freedom of determination and choice.

Western existentialism had also acquired a bad reputation through Diem’s government embracing Catholicism to oppose the North. Many professors of philosophy who introduced Western existentialism into South Vietnam were Catholics trained in Catholic universities in Europe (e.g., Nguyen Van Trung and Tran Thai Dinh). A problem with this criticism, however,
is that these Vietnamese Catholic professors of philosophy had different philosophical preferences in spite of their shared religion. For example, while Nguyen Van Trung and Tran Thai Dinh were both trained at the University of Louvain, the former endorsed atheistic existentialism, especially Sartre’s and Camus’s, while the latter preferred Karl Jaspers and Gabriel Marcel. Tran Thai Dinh was very critical of Sartrean existentialism, claiming that it is a cruel view of life (Tran 1967). By contrast, Nguyen Van Trung supported Sartre’s refusal of God in *Existentialism as a Humanism* and argued for a partially radical understanding of Buddhism as a humanist philosophy that regards man as the center and the source of all values and of responsibility⁴ (Nguyen 1958). In “Sartre trong đời tôi” [Sartre in my life] (Nguyen 1969, 233-284), Nguyen Van Trung explained that he had started reading Sartre in 1951 during the time he studied philosophy at the University of Toulouse (France) before achieving his advanced degree at Louvain. He read Sartre along with Emmanuel Mounier (1905-1950). Existentialism was at its peak in the 1950s and was favored by university students in Europe. In addition, Louvain was very opened to existentialism and Marxism during those years through its open dialogues with contemporary schools of thought. Existentialism and Marxism thus became a part of Nguyen Van Trung’s educational background (Nguyen 1969, 238). In 1957, Father Cao văn Luận invited him to Huế⁴ to build a Vietnamese university and provide lectures in Vietnamese to oppose to the University of Saigon, which Nguyen Van Trung believed was constrained by Feudalism and Imperialism (Nguyen 1969, 242). Nguyen Van Trung also helped to publish the journal *Đại học* and administered the University’s press *Nhà Xuất bản Đại học Huế* [Huế University Press].

As a professor of philosophy and an editor of the journal *Đại học*, Nguyen Van Trung started introducing Western existentialism to Vietnam, especially Sartre and Camus, through his
articles (e.g., Literature and Metaphysics, Empathy, Shyness, the Look, Guilt, and Suicide), which appeared in many journals (e.g., Đại học [housed at the University of Huế] and Creation.) He also offered lectures for pre-university students and formal university courses on metaphysics and the history of philosophy, which included discussions of Western existentialism (Nguyen 1969, 243).

Nguyen Van Trung was disappointed with the political reality of Vietnam during that time and his intention was to avoid its political reality:

Sometimes, I thought about politics but I wanted to forget the political reality that I was not pleased with; at the same time, I also wanted others to follow me [to deny such a politics] so I thought that to appraise philosophy of the absurd and philosophical and amoral literature [Văn chương siêu hình “phi luân”] was a way to deny this political reality though it is a negative way.

The more I was countering opponents, especially those and institutions I hated because of their inauthentic morality, incapability, and opportunism, the more I deployed Sartrean philosophy as a means to denounce and sneer at their attitudes preventing their morality and theism. For example, the Văn đàn group criticized Creation, Modernity, the Twentieth Century and me because the former believed that thinkers of the latter journals introduced a culture of immorality and atheism… At that time, I thought whether they [the Văn đàn group] were sincere or not, atheist and amoral existentialism was like a rock thrown into a still surface to stir their peaceful and satisfactory heart and mind, who self-regard as the force [the Văn đàn group] to protect morality and religion. (Nguyen 1969, 243-244).

Reading Nguyen Van Trung’s biographical article and his published works from the period 1957-1963 reveal his emphasis on existential ethics of revolt. He advanced the thought of Sartre and Camus to revolt against the existing political, moral, and religious reality in Vietnam including South Vietnamese society during that time. He influenced a generation of young Vietnamese existentialist writers and professors of philosophy, e.g., Nguyễn Thị Hoàng, Lê Hằng, Minh Đức Hoài Trinh, and Đăng Phùng Quân. His students were widely accused by both the South and the North Vietnam as those who destroyed Vietnamese moral and religious traditions by embracing a philosophy of absolute freedom, immorality, and quietism. Even the
famous song writer Trịnh Công Sơn was influenced by Nguyen Van Trung’s interpretation of Camusian exile (Schafer 2007). Nguyen Van Trung himself realized his responsibility for such a tone of Vietnamese existentialist thinking:

I am the one who loved, have loved, and will love Sartre’s philosophy more. I am one of the first people who introduced Sartre and contributed many works to the introduction of Sartre in South Vietnam. I, therefore, am partly responsible for both the opponents and the shallow followers of Sartre [in Vietnam] because on the one hand, I only focused on introducing “metaphysical literature,” “poetic philosophy;” on the other hand, I have never thought about the question how to receive existentialist philosophy and literature, especially from the perspective of the young generation who longed for novelty. (Nguyen 1969, 235)

Nguyen Van Trung was not favored by President Diem and his brother, Archbishop Ngô Đình Thựć. He was fired by the University of Hue in 1960 because, in his words, Archbishop Ngô Đình Thựć did “not want to see my face when he received his new position in Hue” (Nguyen 1969, 244). The charge that Vietnamese existentialism was a means of South Vietnamese governments to oppose North Vietnam thus cannot apply to the case of Nguyen Van Trung—who held a core role to make known Western existentialism in South Vietnam before 1963. After 1963, Nguyen Van Trung’s philosophy became more politically engaged, which was manifested in his increasing critique of imperialism (Nguyen 1965, 3-22) and of the existing South Vietnamese society, especially South Vietnamese social structure and its decadent leadership (Nguyen 1964, 4-36; Nguyen 1965, 3-22). As a result, his political existential philosophy became more threatening to the Saigon government. His journal Hành trình was banned by the Saigon government in 1966. After the fall of the Diem regime in 1963 with the increase of American intervention in South Vietnamese politics and the increase of the Vietnam War, the works of other Vietnamese existentialists became more radical and socially and politically engaged in the actual practice of Vietnam politics.
Critics point out that literary works by these writers (e.g., Vòng tay Học trò, Tuổi Sài Gòn, Cát lây, Bế lừa, Thành Cát Tư Hãn) exemplified Western existential themes—namely, nausea, absurdity, nothingness, authenticity, and anxiety. Đỗ Đức Hiệu, e.g., argues that this makes the Vietnamese version of Western existentialism a product of neocolonialist and capitalist culture. These themes, Do Duc Hieu claims, are negative existential themes expressed in the Western existential literature of Sartre, Camus, Beauvoir, and Sagan:

Bearing in itself negative features—a subjective idealism, "opposing" Marxism, requiring absolute freedom, causing extremely puzzled and alarmed state of mind, essentially against the mass [the people], and after the World War II sometimes frenziedly attacking Marxism, the dying Western existentialism produces more new crimes. From resisting Nazism … it becomes the literature of the absurd during peaceful time—with the image of tired, desperate, weak, isolated, and empty men —existential literature exposes its essential defects… (Do 1978, 260)

Do Duc Hieu's arguments presuppose the truth of Marxism. In addition, he does not recognize that in, e.g., Search for a Method, Sartre did not reject Marxism. He only rejected “frozen” and “lazy” Marxists who take Marx’s categories for granted and consider Marxist categories fixed and applicable to any subject anytime and anywhere. In this sense, these categories, originally designed to recover the concreteness of the subject, were turned into a priori schemata that force the studied subjects to fit their pre-existing fixed concepts, which failed to discover and unveil the particularity of the subjects. In this sense, these “lazy Marxists” became idealists like Plato (Sartre 1963, 21-34). Sartre very much appreciated Marx’s own philosophy and modes of analysis. Sartre even claimed that Marxism was the philosophy of the age: "Far from being exhausted, Marxism is still very young, almost in its infancy; it has scarcely begun to develop. It remains, therefore, the philosophy of our time. We cannot go beyond it because we have not gone beyond the circumstances which engendered it" (Sartre 1963, 30). Even Do Duc Hieu's claim that Western existentialism is a philosophy of the absurd, which
paints the image of "tired, desperate, weak, isolated, and empty man" (Do Duc Hieu 260), produces the same type of man in practice is misleading. Sartre's *Nausea*, for example, does not describe the tired and hopeless historian Roquentin to encourage the existence of such a man in practice. Instead, his point is to claim that life sometimes is meaningless and that an individual has the power to give meaning to his life by making his own choices. At the end of the novel, Roquentin appears as a hopeful man at the moment he decides he will become a creative writer. Suddenly, everything has its meaning and he finds joy in his soul.

Đỗ Đức Hiệu also claims that Vietnamese existentialism is a bad distortion of Western existentialism in the sense that even though Western existentialism is supposedly a product of capitalism, it is still better than the Vietnamese version because Western existentialists often reject the capitalist system while the Vietnamese proponents shamefully supported American neo-colonialism. Do Duc Hieu contradicts himself here because he, on the one hand, claims that Western existentialism is bad because it is a capitalist product but then acknowledges non-capitalist forms of existentialism, which means his real criticism is of capitalism, not existentialism. Moreover, his claim that Vietnamese existentialists supported capitalism and neo-colonialism is contradicted by those, such as Nguyen Van Trung’s and Lý Chánh Trung, who strongly rejected American neo-colonialism in their writings.

Finally, existentialism was badly misunderstood in Vietnam in both the South and the North and the term ‘existentialism’ was conflated to cover all sorts of writings that the public thought was immoral or suspect. Existentialism was identified with pessimism, hopelessness, impassivity, meaningfulness, disorder, immorality, and taboos (Phong Hien 1984; Khái Triệu 1969; Do 1978; Cao 1968; Cao 1969; Cao 1968). Any literary work that examined sex, sexual taboos, and sexual desire were considered to be existential literature. Works that presented a
depraved life of pleasure and rebellious behaviors were identified with existentialism. Philosophical and literary works that were abstract, ambiguous, difficult to understand, and divorced from life and explored the meaning of life, nothingness, rebellion from God, nausea, absurdity, death, suicide, and freedom were considered to be existentialist. Such philosophy and literature, many Vietnamese scholars contended, were destroying the society. Furthermore, these critics viewed existentialism as encouraging people to withdraw from the fight for social revolution. Existentialism, in its Western and Vietnamese forms, received mass disapproval in Vietnam (Do 1978, 262). Đo Đức Hiếu’s discussion raised the important question of which works should be included under the category of existentialism and which ones should not. In other words, what exactly existentialism is needs to be discussed before the charge of its bad influence on the Vietnamese culture as sexual and violent excitement is levied against it.

In 1978 a conference entitled Congress on Several Issues in Ideological Practice in Southern Vietnam under the American-Nguy Regime was held in Ho Chi Minh City. Nguyen Trong Van, who used to live and study philosophy under the Republic of Vietnam and had witnessed the import and the development of Western existentialism in Southern Vietnam, presented a paper entitled "Hai bộ mặt của chủ nghĩa hiện sinh tác dụng của chủ nghĩa hiện sinh đối với tầng lớp trí thức trong phong trào cách mạng chống chế độ Mỹ-ngụy" (Existentialism’s Two Faces, or the Effect of Existentialism on Intellectual Groups in the Revolution Against American-Southern Vietnamese Regime). He argued that Western existentialism was imported into Southern Vietnam through (1) Catholic Vietnamese professors, French trained Nguyen Van Trung, Tran Thai Dinh, Nguyen Sa, Le Tuyen, Buu Duong; (2) Buddhist university professors and Buddhist monks, namely, Le Ton Nghiêm, Pham Cong Thien, Ngo Trong Anh, Chon Hanh, Thich Duc Nhuan; (3) Literary journals, artists, writers, and
novelists such as The Uyen, Vũ Khắc Khoan, Nguyễn Thị Hoàng, Trương Dương, Duy Thanh; (4) philosophy curricula at high schools and universities taught by Catholic professors such as Nguyễn Văn Trung and Trần Thái Đình; and (5) existential works in their original languages, their translations, as well as reference books introducing existentialism to different groups by professors such as Nguyễn Văn Trung, Trần Thái Đình (Lê 1996, 84-85).

This paper marks an important point in the scholarship of existentialism in Vietnam. Later, it is frequently quoted by other Vietnamese Marxist scholars. In fact, Lê Kim Châu mainly agrees with Nguyễn Trọng Văn on the ways in which Western existentialism was imported into Vietnam. Furthermore, this is the first time existentialism was judged more fairly from the view of an insider under the communist regime in Vietnam. Recently in the journal Hopkins published in California, Nguyễn Văn Lục claims that Nguyễn Trọng Văn's view on the Vietnamese version of Western existentialism is based on the Marxist view. As a result, the former raises the question whether Nguyễn Trọng Văn's scholarship on existentialism is fair:

… The influence of existential philosophy through Nguyễn Văn Trung's lenses in the process Sartre - Nguyễn Văn Trung - young Vietnamese intellectuals produced extreme, possibly imitative, intellectually make-up (decorative) work as Nguyễn Trọng Văn claimed. Nguyễn Trọng Văn's judgment possibly was based on Marxist view on social revolution. Is it bias? (Nguyễn 2006, 98)

In 1996 Nguyễn Phúc defended his dissertation, “Khảo sát sự du nhập của phân tâm học và chủ nghĩa hiện sinh vào văn học đô thị miền Nam trước năm 1975” (An Investigation into the Arrival of Freudianism and Existentialism into Vietnamese Literature in Southern Cities before 1975), in the History of Vietnamese Literature in Ho Chi Minh City. Nguyễn Phúc contended that there was a positive influence of Western existentialism on Vietnamese literature:

Adopting critically the French existential philosophy and literature’s contributions, existentialist literature in Southern cities of Vietnam before 1975 contributes to the reform of literature, reflects capitalist society, and accuses Sai
Gon administration’s crimes opposed by the American military (Nguyễn Phúc 1996, 22).

Nguyen Phuc's dissertation has not been published. The access to the dissertation is by visiting the National Library of Ho Chi Minh City. As a result, the dissertation’s impact on the scholarship is limited.

In 1996, Lê Kim Châu defended his dissertation, “Chủ nghĩa hiện sinh và một vài ảnh hưởng của nó ở miền Nam Việt Nam” (Existentialism and its several impacts in Southern Vietnam). While Nguyen Tien Dung and Nguyen Phuc created a space for analyzing literary texts, Lê Kim Châu looked at the works of Vietnamese professors of philosophy, in particular Nguyen Van Trung and Tran Thai Dinh and Vietnamese Buddhists such as Thích Đức Nhuan and Chon Hanh, to demonstrate the impact of Western existentialism on Vietnamese philosophical thought, religions, and political practice before 1975.

Lê Kim Châu's dissertation has also not been published. However, it is available in many libraries and universities (e.g., the National University of Hanoi, the National University of Vietnam in Hanoi, the Ho Chi Minh National Political Academy, the Institute of Philosophy at the Vietnamese Center for Social Sciences), and among many scholars of philosophy. It is considered the foremost Marxist approach to Western and Vietnamese existential thought. It also is one of the systematic works on how Western existentialism was imported into Vietnam. In comparison with Nguyen Tien Dung's dissertation, it is more philosophical in the sense that it explores more philosophical texts by Vietnamese scholars of philosophy from 1954-1975.

Lê Kim Châu drew upon Nguyen Trong Van’s research on the five sources from which Western existentialism was imported into Vietnam and divided these pioneers in Vietnamese Western existentialism into three groups: Catholic university professors, Buddhist university
professors and Buddhist monks, and writers and novelists. Lê Kim Châu focused on the first two
groups and their works.

Among the first group, Lê Kim Châu considered Nguyen Van Trung and Tran Thai Dinh
to be the two most important figures. Lê Kim Châu briefly examined Nguyen Van Trung’s
important books and articles such as *Triết học tổng quát* (An Introduction to Philosophy), "Đặt
lại văn đề Truyện Kiều* (Re-examining the Tale of Kieu), and "Văn đề giải thoát trong Phật giáo
và tư tưởng Sartre" (On Salvation in Buddhism and Sartre’s Thought) to demonstrate that
Nguyen Van Trung (1) introduced and praised Western existentialism as a humane and a future
philosophy of the world to Vietnamese college students and intellectuals; (2) addressed central
themes in Western existentialism, namely, *alienation* and *bad faith* in his works; (3) applied
these themes in Vietnamese literary criticism; and (4) used Western existentialism to advocate
Buddhism in the sense that Buddhism and Sartrean philosophy both view human existence as
suffering, anguish, and nausea. To be liberated from such nausea, human beings must make
choices and accept responsibility for their existence. This demand leads to a conflict between
conscious and non-conscious aspects of life. Human beings are always in a conflict between
their project and the fact that consciousness can never become identical with being-in-itself.

Human beings are always driven into a lamentable position. Nguyen Van Trung, according to
Lê Kim Châu, argues that in that sense Sartrean philosophy fails to liberate human beings from
an anguished life, but Buddhism can do so because Buddhism offers the blissful experience of
Nirvana.

Lê Kim Châu examined Tran Thai Dinh’s book *Triết học nhập môn* (An Introduction to
Philosophy), which was used for high school students and university students of the University
of Letter and the University of Hue. He saw this book, despite its title, not as an introduction to
philosophy in general, but rather as an introduction to existentialism. Lê Kim Châu held that this book played a very important role in introducing existentialism to Vietnam since it made the students believe that existentialism is the only helpful philosophy for human life (Lê 1996, 96). Lê Kim Châu asserted that Tran Thai Dinh simply mirrors Karl Jasper’s and Gabriel Marcel’s ideas on the issues of the subject, characteristics, origin, and problems of philosophy (Lê 1996, 94-96). Furthermore, Tran Thai Dinh, Lê Kim Châu argued, used Western existentialism to introduce and support Catholicism, to criticize atheism (both Marxism and atheist existentialism), and to oppose materialism (Lê 1996, 105).

Existentialism was also introduced by Vietnamese Buddhist philosophy professors and Buddhist monks. Lê Kim Châu briefly examined the Buddhist Chon Hanh’s article “Trắc tư về cái chết trong tư tưởng Heidegger and Phật giáo” (Meditation on Death in Heidegger’s Thought and Buddhism) to conclude that Vietnamese Buddhists (1) “existentialize Buddhism to modernize Vietnamese Buddhism” (Lê 1996) and (2) "combine Western existentialism and Buddhism subjectively to support the nihilist and divorced attitude toward practice" (Lê 1996, 107). While demonstrating the negative influences of Western existentialism on Vietnamese Buddhism, Lê Kim Chau recognizes that "the parallels between Western existentialism and Vietnamese Buddhism are an interesting topic needed to be further studied and explained why there are such similarities" (Lê 1996, 106). He did not, however, examine this important aspect of the influence of European existentialism on Vietnamese Buddhism. He also did not examine how Vietnamese Buddhism appreciated and went beyond Western existentialism.

Lê Kim Châu then demonstrated that the existential approach to Con đường thứ ba (the third way) of doing social revolution, an economic and political idea that positions itself between democratic socialism and laissez-faire capitalism, was actually present in Vietnam and had its
impact on Vietnamese petit-bourgeois intellectuals living in Southern cities particularly in
Nguyen Van Trung’s and Lý Chánh Trung’s political thought. Both Nguyen Van Trung and Lý
Chánh Trung, in the journal Hành trình (Journey) established after the fall of Diem’s
administration to introduce and support “non-communist socialism,” according to Lê Kim Châu,
were day-dreaming about their social revolutionary plans since Nguyen Van Trung wanted to
offer “the third way” based on America’s support, while Lý Chánh Trung proposed Cách mạng
dạo đức (An Ethical revolution) in which the Vietnamese could cultivate social revolution
without using weapons and military force; as a result, social revolution could be successful
without violence (Lê 1996, 112).

Lê Kim Châu also looked at the development of the importing of Western existentialism
into Vietnam. He divided the process into two periods based on the event of November 1, 1963,
when Diem’s administration was overthrown. The first period dated from early 1950 to
November 1963. He contends that theistic existentialism was introduced into Vietnam by
Catholic intellectuals only because Catholic professors were supported by Diem’s government.
Diem hoped to make the society Catholic. During this period the priest Tran Thai Dinh, as we
already saw, mainly introduced Karl Jaspers' and Gabriel Marcel’s existentialism to support
Catholicism. Lê Kim Châu then argued that, after November 1963, "existentialism in Vietnam
had a turning point. People started using different themes in Western existentialism to serve
different goals. In spiritual practice of the society existentialism started bringing into play its
roles and influencing in public" (Lê 1996, 82).

If Catholic philosophy professors played the most important role in introducing Western
existentialism as a philosophy in the first period, during the second period Buddhist scholars
played a significant role in applying existential themes in Western existentialism to modernize
their thought. The journal Từ tương (Ideology) was founded in 1967 and housed by Đại học Văn Hạnh (The Buddhist University of Van Hanh) as the stage for Buddhist scholars to bring Western existentialism and Vietnamese Buddhism together. Although Western existentialism was praised as a "humanistic," "modernized philosophy" and the "philosophy of throwing oneself" in the first period, it faced two opposite attitudes in the second. On the one hand, it was defended and even praised (Lê 1996, 98) because it encouraged people to transcend the absurd world. On the other hand, existentialism was misunderstood. As we saw, many Vietnamese scholars associated it with depravity, a philosophy of leading a loose life, a philosophy of here and now without consideration for the future (Lê 1996, 98). Not only Northern but also several Southern scholars—namely, Cao Thé Dung and the journal Quán Chúng (The Masses) published in Sai Gon—consider existentialism “dangerous and bad”(Cao 1969, 44-54; Cao 1968, 5-21; Cao 1968, 59-80). It needed to be, in their view, dismissed.

While Nguyen Phuc examined the positive impact of Western existentialism on Vietnamese literature, Nguyen Tien Dung’s dissertation, entitled “Chủ nghĩa Hiền Sinh: Lịch sử, Sự hiện diện ở Việt Nam” [Existentialism: Its History and Presence in Vietnam], published as a reference book in 1999 by the National Political Publisher, supplemented the two mentioned dissertations with a focus on the negative effect of Western existentialism on Vietnamese literature. The work has three chapters. The first introduces briefly the historical and social condition in the West for the birth of existentialism and the relation between existentialism and the history of philosophy. Nguyen Tien Dung does this by briefly restating and introducing Western existential thought through the philosophers Socrates, Augustine, Blaise Pascal, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Jaspers, Marcel, Chestov, Nicolas Berdyaev, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and Paul Tillich. He then outlines Husserl’s phenomenology, a central theme of
existentialism (e.g., the uniqueness of the individual), and other related existential themes, namely, freedom, subjectivity, being-in-itself, being-for-itself, meaning, choice, nausea, loneliness, anxiety, alienation, death, responsibility, transcendence, projects, and God. He then examines the presence of existentialism in Vietnamese literature.

In the first section of the third chapter, Nguyen Tien Dung demonstrates the existence of core themes in Western existentialism in Vietnamese literature from 1960s to 1970s in the South of Vietnam very briefly. The first existential topic concerned by the Vietnamese existential writers such as Thanh Tam Tuyen, Vu Khac Khoan, Nguyen Manh Con, and Nguyen Thi Hoang is the encounter with the absurd. Here, Nguyen Tien Dung aimed to prove that the Saigon existentialism is a type of nihilism because these writers supposedly saw life as meaninglessness. In this meaningless world, they lived their life without goals and passions. Individuals were described as tired, desperate, hopeless, and empty. The feeling of nothingness, in one sense, forced the individuals to see their alienation: the separation of oneself with oneself as well as that of oneself and one's society, which Nguyen Tien Dung blamed as "Saigon nihilism of history" (Nguyen Tien Dung 1999, 129). The feeling of estrangement was everywhere. They did not know even who they were. They felt small and indifferent in the strange world (Nguyen Tien Dung 1999, 128-129).

Nguyen Tien Dung asked how the Vietnamese existentialists respond to the meaningless world. He observed two tendencies: theistic and atheistic. The Buddhist existentialist Thich Duc Nhuan, he claims, took advantage of the existential worldview that life is hopeless, introduced Buddhism, and claimed that Buddhism was able to bring hope and meaning to life by faith as a way to deal with the present disease (nihilism) (Nguyen Tien Dung 1999, 128-129). However,
Nguyen Tien Dung did not explain how Vietnamese Buddhist existential thinkers could bring meaning and hope to life.

Unfortunately, Nguyen Tien Dung was not able to recognize the contributions of Vietnamese Buddhism as well as the Vietnamese Catholic existentialists in his critique of Western existentialism:

Vietnamese existentialists were pioneers to introduce Western existentialism into South Vietnam. Here, there was almost no contribution, because Western theistic existentialism such as neo-Thomism with Kierkegaard, Berdyaev, Mounier, Jaspers, especially Marcel offered enough arguments to prove the human's dependence on God, to affirm that freedom means to follow God. God is the source of existence and the foundation of freedom (Nguyễn 1999, 127).

Vietnamese atheistic existentialists turned to Camus, Nguyen Tien Dung explained, because Camus' philosophy concerned rebellion by means of freedom, desire, suicide, and death (Nguyễn 1999, 133).

Rebel [sic] as one existential way to save the individual's encounter with meaninglessness was introduced to Saigon. Camus distinguished ‘rebel’ [sic] and ‘revolution’: revolution replaced love by hatred, therefore, it leads to an extreme human killing system; while rebel left injustice by unconsciousness (Nguyen Tien Dung 1999, 134).

Nguyen Tien Dung emphasized unconsciousness as the root of Camusian and Sartrean concept of freedom introduced to the South. He also interprets Sartre's conception of freedom as freedom from consciousness. Any action that is not controlled by consciousness is a free action: “Project as freedom, according to Sartre, is not actions determined by causes but irrational actions, which are beyond reasons. They (free actions) are not rational but instinctual and unconscious ones" (Nguyen Tien Dung 1999, 145).

Interpreting Sartrean conception of freedom as such, Nguyen Tien Dung proved that there was existentialism in Saigon because the theme of freedom was expressed widely in literary work such as Tuổi Sài Gòn and Vòng tay Học trò by Nguyen Thi Hoang and Cát lây by
Thanh Tam Tuyen and Mưa không ướt đất by Trung Duong. Nguyen Tien Dung quotes Nguyen Thi Hoang: "Freedom and loneliness escape from the control of consciousness projecting into life as risk" (Nguyen 1999, 135). He explains that the Sai Gon existential writers focused on love since love was considered freedom from moral rules: "They saw love as freedom, since it is out of the control of consciousness. Consciousness is morality; therefore, love is out of the control of morality rather than non-morality" (Nguyễn 1999, 135).

It appears to me that Nguyen Tien Dung’s interpretation of love as an instinctual and unconscious act of freedom is related to not being constrained by consciousness and reason. Furthermore, morality is considered by the Vietnamese common view as a set of moral rules issued by reason to control passions and desires. Reason is replaceable or equal with consciousness.

Nguyen Tien Dung's crucial move to prove the expression of French existentialism in Saigon literature is that there is a parallel understanding between Sartre, Camus and the Vietnamese writers on the concept of freedom. However, Nguyen Tien Dung's understanding of the Sartrean conception of freedom is misleading. Sartre, in Being and Nothingness, claims that freedom is freedom to make choices consciously because consciousness includes both pre-reflective and reflective consciousnesses. He actually resists the view that there are unconscious actions because he thought that unconscious actions, especially of censoring one’s thoughts, were contradictions of terms, and even more, the notion necessarily undermined responsibilities. Sartre rejects the determination of human nature or instinct on human actions because if one is always determined by one's fixed nature, how, then, it is possible for one to be responsible for one's acts since what one does is necessarily caused by one's nature. Making choices is not determined by one's previous decisions. One has to make one's own choices perpetually in each
situation one faces. One's choices also are not determined by existing values, although they are contextualized by them. There are always possibilities for one to choose to obey the existing values or not. In this sense, Sartre does not hold that freedom is freedom from consciousness. Furthermore, Nguyen Tien Dung’s interpretation of the Sartrean notion of freedom conflicts with Sartre’s core claim that consciousness is nothingness. If free actions are determined by one's unconsciousness as Nguyen Tien Dung interprets Sartrean freedom, Sartre's own notion of consciousness as nothingness would undermine its own nature, nothingness, since consciousness now would be fixed by unconsciousness. Besides, Sartre explicitly rejects the unconscious in his discussion of bad faith. The lack of serious understanding of Western existentialism among some contemporary Vietnamese scholars weakens their judgments on both Western and Vietnamese existential thought. The interpretation of existential freedom as freedom from consciousness unless, of course, consciousness is here interpreted as class-consciousness and freedom to do what one sexually and spontaneously desires encourages a negative view of existentialism in the Vietnamese context. This is one of the main reasons why existentialism was and is associated with sexual taboo, extreme freedom in sexual activities, and anti-morality in Vietnam.

Nguyen Tien Dung's claim on the negative aspect of Vietnamese existentialism can be applied to only one branch of Vietnamese existentialism, the tendency to appreciate and interpret Western existentialism as a philosophy of the absurd and of the inward life (e.g., philosophy of anxiety, loneliness, and death) manifested in some Vietnamese existentialist writers (e.g., Nguyen Thi Hoang, Le Hang, and Dang Phung Quan). Vietnamese existential philosophy cannot be reduced to only one branch as such. It is much more diverse. In addition, Vietnamese existentialism had developed over time. Even the Vietnamese tendency to appreciate Western
existentialism as philosophy of the absurd before 1963 (i.e., Nguyen Van Trung's version of existential philosophy) changed its focus from the meaningless of life to social, political, and historical aspects of Vietnamese context.

Importantly, Nguyen Tien Dung's claim that Vietnamese existentialism does not reject capitalist social structure is not quite correct because the later Nguyen Van Trung's political existentialism was an attempt to uncover the dehumanized, colonized, and decadent social structure of South Vietnam and to argue for a social revolution to change its present situation. Nguyen Van Trung's critique of colonialism and imperialism was clearly manifested in many works such as *Chủ nghĩa thực dân Pháp ở Việt Nam: thực chất và Huyền thoại* [The French Colonialism in Vietnam: Facts and Myths], *Tư sự thất bại của các Đảng phát Quốc gia đến sự phá sản của tầng lớp trường gia thàn thị trong vai trò lãnh đạo cách mạng xã hội trước áp lực thống trị của những chủ nghĩa thực dân mới* [From the failure of Nationalist Parties to the Downfall of Urban Bourgeoisie in their role as Social Revolutionary Leadership confronting the Increasing Domination by Neo-imperialisms], *Độc tài hay dân chủ* [Dictatorship and Democracy] (Nguyen 1970, 52-60), *Chiến tranh và Cách mạng* [War and Revolution] (Nguyen 1970, 61-94), *Chủ quyền quốc gia trước sự can thiệp của ngoài bang* [National Independence and Foreign Invasion] (Nguyen 1970, 95-105), *Vấn đề chúng ta* [We as Problem] (Nguyen 1970, 106-140), and *Người vong bản trí thức* [Vietnamese-original-forgetting-intellectuals] (Nguyen 1963, 172-195). In addition, Lý Chánh Trung uncovered who the Vietnamese was in the structure of the Self-Other relation and rejected the dominating Other manifested in forms of the master (Lý 1960). Furthermore, Nguyen Tien Dung fails to recognize that Vietnamese Buddhism during the period 1954-1975 is a mode of existential philosophy. As a result, he does not discuss how Vietnamese Buddhist existential philosophers criticized the oppressive and
dehumanized social structure in which the Vietnamese were enslaved by one-sided point of view, by one or several schools of thought and ideologies, by belief in substantial self, by material objects, by subjective and absolute freedom (Tuệ Sỹ 1965; Minh Châu 1990; Đức Nhuận 1967; Nhật Hạnh 1964; Nhật Hạnh 1966; Nhật Hạnh 1967). In addition, Vietnamese existential Buddhism strongly rejected this structure.

Why Were Western and Vietnamese Existentialisms Misunderstood?

Though Lê Kim Chau’s dissertation contributes to the understanding of how Western existentialism was imported into South Vietnam, he does not explain why Western existentialism was understood by its Vietnamese existential followers as a philosophy of absolute freedom (i.e., freedom from moral rules and to do whatever one wants), of the absurd, and of revolt. He also does not explain why both Western and Vietnamese existentialisms were criticized as philosophies that embrace absolute freedom, immorality, revolt against Vietnamese moral and religious tradition, and are quietist, withdrawing from the social and political realities of Vietnam. In this section, I argue that there are reasons Western and Vietnamese existentialisms were understood by the Vietnamese as such. By re-visiting the importation and the introduction of Western existentialism into South Vietnam based on Western existential works translated into Vietnamese, research conducted and lectures delivered by Vietnamese scholars during the period 1954-1975, I think the misunderstanding is based on these reasons: (1) Vietnamese translations of Western existential work were focused on original works that present existentialism as a philosophy of freedom, of absurdity, of revolt, of quietness, of anxiety, and of death; (2) reference and text books, articles, and lectures about Western existentialism written and
delivered by Vietnamese scholars focused on existentialism as philosophy of freedom, of absurdity, of revolt, and of death; (3) Vietnamese literary writers devoted their works to express these mentioned existential aspects; (4) the political aspect of Western existentialism was not introduced after the fall of Diem in 1963 and even after 1963 the political aspect of Vietnamese existentialism was not introduced widely as the ontological and sentimental aspects to South Vietnam; (5) Vietnamese existential thinkers did not realize a need to read Western existentialism from the social and political context of Vietnam and to reflect upon the Vietnamese social and political situation applying phenomenological existentialism until the fall of Diem in 1963. Even then, there was only a small group of Vietnamese existential thinkers who devoted their work to study political aspect of Vietnam. A large number of Vietnamese existential followers were still imprisoned in the ontological and sentimental aspects of existentialism.

A large number of Western existential primary texts translated into Vietnamese focus on Heidegger, Nietzsche, the early Sartre, and Camus. The political aspects of the later Sartre, the thought of Frantz Fanon, and the moral aspects of de Beauvoir were ignored. European Existentialism as the philosophy of freedom, of absurdity, revolt, anxiety, and death was introduced in a long list of Vietnamese translations. Among these works, only one philosophical essay was published. Sartre's most important philosophical works, namely, *Being and Nothingness*, *Imagination*, *The Transcendence of the Ego*, *Search for A Method*, and *Critique of Dialectical Reason* were not translated into Vietnamese during the time. Most of the translated books were Sartre's fiction and plays. Some introductory secondary texts on Western existentialism written by Western scholars were translated (e.g., *Jean-Paul Sartre, Héros et victim de la "conscience malheureuse"* by André Neil, *Kierkegaard* written by Georges Gusdorf
Introduction aux existentialismes by Emanuel Mounier, *L' existentialisme* [Existentialism; *Chủ nghĩa hiện sinh*] written by Paul Foulquié.) However, they mainly emphasize existentialism as a philosophy of the absurd and of existential moods and emotions and its ontological aspect.

Though mainly discussing the ontological aspect of existentialism, this book devotes one section to “Existentialism and Communism” (Foulquié and Thu Nhan 1965-1966, 120-135) which questions the relation between the Communist revolution, its violent methods, and humanity. This is an aspect of Vietnamese existentialism which several North Vietnamese scholars regarded as the “anti-Communist” (*chống cộng*) side of Vietnamese existentialism.

Second, reference and text books, articles, and lectures about Western existentialism written and delivered by Vietnamese scholars focused extensively on existentialism as a philosophy of freedom, of absurdity, of revolt, of anxiety, of death, and of meanings of existence (e.g., *Martin Heidegger và tư tưởng hiện đại* [Martin Heidegger and Contemporary Thought], *Con đường ngộ ba: Bước đi của tư tưởng* [The Cross Road: The Western Thought’s Journey] by Bùi Giáng (1926-1998). Among Western existentialists, Bui Giang especially appreciated Heideggerian philosophy of Being and Camusian revolt. Bui Giang was most interested in searching for the Being of beings suggested in these Western existentialists and through his profoundly poetic reflection on existence. That is, he searched for the ontological meaning of human existence (i.e., for the awareness of a harmonization between the individual’s heart and mind with the constant change of existence itself). In this moment, the individual becomes a friend of Nature. Better described, the individual joins Nature. At the same time, he realizes his feeling of great loneliness because other vulgar human beings did not understand him and his ideas (Bùi 2001, 147-148).
A number of introductory and textbooks on Western existentialism were published. For example, *Triết học hiện sinh* [Existentialism] by Trần Thái Dinh was published in Sài Gòn by Thời Mới in 1967. This 384 page-long book is the best seller and one of the most important and popular books introducing European Existentialism into Vietnam. As a Catholic professor of philosophy, Trần Thái Dinh especially appreciated the philosophy of theist existentialists. He does not like Sartrean version of existentialism, characterizing it as cruel because Sartre’s philosophy supposedly fails to offer a portrait of harmonious relation among human beings. Trần Thái Dinh’s book, however, does not examine any political aspect of the later Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Frantz Fanon.

Phạm Công Thien contributed many books introducing existentialism into Vietnam with a focus on Nietzsche and Heidegger in *Họ thẩm tư tưởng* published by An Tiêm in 1967, *Im lặng hổ thám* first published by An Tiêm in 1967 and reprinted by Phạm Hoàng in 1969, *Ý thức mới trong văn nghệ và triết học* [New Consciousness in Literature and Philosophy] published by An Tiêm in 1970, and *Ý thức bùng vỡ* [the Exploding Consciousness] published by Phạm Hoàng in 1970, just to list some. Phạm Công Thien was also interested in finding the parallel between Nietzsche’s and Heidegger’s thought and Buddhist Philosophy. In *Ý thức bùng vỡ* he dedicated a chapter to discussing the failure of Heidegger’s thought (Pham 1970, 79-220) and another chapter to Husserl (Pham 1970, 257-310). In *Im lặng hổ thám* he devoted 156 pages to a discussion of the question why Nietzsche has to be quiet (Pham 1969, 199-355). Throughout his series of books and articles, Pham Cong Thien especially embraced Nietzsche’s version of Western existentialism manifested in the latter’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* with an emphasis on Nietzsche’s critique and revolt against common men with common consciousness to become an over-man with a “new consciousness” [Ý thức mới] as Pham Cong Thien put it. Pham Cong
Thien understands this new consciousness as equal as Buddhist “no-mind”/Absolute Emptiness—a completely free consciousness from traditional morality and way of thinking. In addition, Nietzsche's political philosophy was not introduced. Moreover, it seems to me that Pham Cong Thien wrote when he was depressed with extreme mood swing from extreme feelings of isolation, loneliness, and boredom to extreme elation. Existentialism as a philosophy of revolt and of inward life, was introduced to Vietnam through Pham Cong Thien’s works.

The Vietnamese scholar and literary critic Tam Ích made an effort to bridge modern Western existentialism and Oriental thought especially in his book Sartre and Heidegger Trên thảm xanh [Sartre and Heidegger on the Green Mat] (Tam Ích 1969, 304). This is one of the most profound interpretations of Western phenomenological existentialism by a serious Vietnamese scholar because it investigates the phenomenological foundation of Heidegger’s and Sartre’s ontology, especially their understanding of the structures of Being and consciousness. Besides Nguyen Van Trung, Tam Ich is also one of the pioneers raising the question of setting Western existentialism within Oriental and Vietnamese contexts. Tam Ich’s introduction of Western existentialism to Vietnam, however, emphasized only existentialism’s abstract ontology with a focus on Heidegger’s concept of nothingness and the early Sartre’s Being and Nothingness. Sartre’s phenomenology of history and of the social world, therefore, was missed. The situation, Tam Ich suggested, is philosophical context. It still is abstract and general because existential thinking had yet not directed itself to its political world. That is, Western existentialism had not yet been read from the practical need of Vietnam.

Nguyễn Văn Trung is the author of many books introducing and applying Western existential and phenomenological approach. His books are Triết học tổng quát: Vấn đề triết học [General Philosophy: the Problems of Philosophy] published by Nam Sơn in 1967. This
textbook was first published in 1957 and reprinted with revision in 1967 for university students. In this book, Nguyên Văn Trung devoted chapter IV to Husserl and Phenomenology (from page 45 to 58) and chapter V to different branches of existentialism (pp. 81-96).

In only six pages in a book Triết học tổng quát: Luận lý học và Đạo đức học [General Philosophy: Epistemology and Ethics], which was published by Á Châu in 1957 designed for high school students of Chu Văn An, Sài Gòn and the University of Huế (Nguyen 1957, 5), Nguyên Văn Trung was able to introduce briefly different branches of existentialism with a focus on existential ethics. He made the following points. First, life is absurd. Second, one has responsibility to bring meanings to this meaningless world and one's own life. He also depicted existentialism from two perspectives: the negative and the positive theories. The negative theory, Nguyên Văn Trung believed, expresses one's disappointment with all existing systems and values as a temporary stage toward transforming the meaningless world and one's negative emotions, namely, disappointment, despair, and the like.

The positive aspect of existentialism, according to Nguyên Văn Trung, indicates that man has to establish one's own values. To establish one's own values, Nguyên Văn Trung believed, is equal with "opposing all abstract system, habits, conventions, beautiful things such as cooked food ready to be enjoyed" (Nguyễn 1967, 166-167). In this sense, existential ethical values are based on a firm belief in some autonomous freedom to make new values or to choose values for oneself:

However, disappointment to believe in oneself, and that one's life is good or bad, cheerful or sad is the result of oneself. Disappointment in order to act authentically knowing that one's lamentable condition and in the dizziness of condemned freedom without established path to go but to choose basing solely on oneself (Nguyễn 1967, 167).
Clearly, Nguyễn Văn Trung adopted an existential ethics of autonomous freedom of individuals which considers individuals the source and the creator of all values.

Secondly, according to Nguyen Van Trung, the real meaning of this world is not justice, love, truth, goodness, morality, and the like. Such good concepts are illusions. In fact, Nguyen Van Trung holds, life is not harmonious but disordered and violence, which causes despair and anxiety. A man does not have a pre-determined good nature. What he does make who he is (Nguyễn 1967, 165-166). Good concepts and theories, according to Nguyen Van Trung, are traps that pull one to a safe place in which men feel smugness. Taking refuge negates one's anxiety over dark aspects of the human condition; therefore, it prevents one from seeing the true meanings of existence. Death, which is the fate of everyone and in it is a clue to the end of everything, reveals the fact that life is absurd and that life has no pre-existing and determined meanings. Life is absurd and tragic and one is responsible for bringing meaning to one's own life via one's freedom of choice and creation. Nguyen Van Trung’s interpretation of Camus’ “false hope” as a hope for one’s home after being exiled is a denial of absurd existence and his suggestion to be a hero choosing to live this lonely world, according to John Schafer (Schafer 2007, 162-164) was appealing to the famous Vietnamese song writer Trinh Cong Son’s songs about a lonely exile. Nguyen Van Trung, in his article Some Reflections on the Absurd Condition of the Exile, appreciated Camus’s disclosure of absurd condition of the exile while advocating the Vietnamese to accept the absurd and to live one’s life as an exiled hero:

To hope for another life, to long for one’s quê nhà [home] after being exiled, is another way to deny an absurd existence but [such a denial] won’t bring an end to absurdity. Camus calls this way of escape philosophical suicide. Therefore, one must wake up and cry out about the absurdity of life, but then, in order to be willing to remain in that life, accept this fact: Exile is one’s Quê nhà. (Nguyen 1960, 20).
Later, reflecting upon ten years of introducing Western existentialism into South Vietnam in his biographical article *Sartre trong đời tôi* [*Sartre in My Life*] (Nguyen 1969, 233-283), Nguyen Van Trung realized that he was responsible for the misunderstanding of existentialism in the context of Vietnam because he, in his early profession, was extremely attracted to these aspects of Western existentialism as the philosophy of the absurd and revolt appraising a strong individual suggested by Camus and the early Sartre leaving political existentialism in dark:

I am the one who loved, has loved, and will love Sartre’s philosophy more. I am one among the first people who introduced Sartre and contributed many works to the introduction of Sartre in South Vietnam. I, therefore, am partly responsible for both the opponents’ criticism of existentialism and the shallow followers of Sartre [in Vietnam]. On the one hand, I only focused on introducing “metaphysical literature.” “poetic philosophy;” on the other hand, I have never thought about the question how to receive existentialist philosophy and literature, especially from the perspective of the young generation who longs for novelty (Nguyen 1969, 235).

The Vietnamese existential writer Nguyen Thi Hoang was the main target of criticism by opponents of existentialism from the North and the South. There were reasons explaining why Nguyen Thi Hoang was badly criticized. First, she advanced Nguyen Van Trung’s interpretation of Western existentialism as philosophy of the absurd and of revolt. Topics such as the boredom and absurdity of life, the imposition of convention and tradition over individual, individual rebellion to traditional morality to realize one’s authentic self are dominant in her novels. Second, her novels discuss controversial moral issues. For example, *Vòng tay học trò* [in the Arms of the Student], her most famous and also scandalous novel, was the main target of criticisms due to its “immorality” because it tells a story of a young and beautiful teacher falling in love and having sex with an under-18 year-old-male student (clearly, this situation is illegal if it actually happens). On the one hand, the author also was critiqued as a “slut” who “smuggles” Western existentialist ideas and way of life and introduced them into South Vietnam (Cao 1968).
Influenced by Nguyen Van Trung and the Vietnamese tendency to emphasize Western existentialism as such, Nguyen Thi Hoang’s novels, I think, while exploring topics such as absurdity, meaninglessness, loneliness, despair, revolt, and the body, do not explore social and political reality that constitutes these phenomena. In addition, it is fair to say that some aspects of the rebellion described by her novels are a negative revolt aiming at destruction rather than at reconstruction. If the social, moral, and political reality is decadent, a philosophy that deconstructs this social structure is progressive. Deconstruction should not be taken as a goal but only as a means to attain a new and better society. Furthermore, Nguyen Thi Hoang sometimes understands rebellion simply as self-destruction (e.g., the student Minh destroyed himself by alcohol and fights in nightclubs). This rebellion often leads to impossibility (e.g., the relationship between the teacher and the student darkened their lives and ended with a separation). The contemporary Vietnamese negative assessments of 1954-1975 Vietnamese existentialism reflect complex concerns.

Missing Points

There are many problems with the aforementioned critical Vietnamese scholarship on existentialism. First, the post-1975 contemporary Vietnamese critical assessments and interpretations of Vietnamese existentialism during the period 1954-1975 are Eurocentric. They are Eurocentric because they consider existential philosophy a European phenomenon only. They are Eurocentric because their core approach and standard of judgments are rooted in a Western philosophy—Marxism. Furthermore, these assessments are Eurocentric because they define existentialism only by and from European body of existential literature. Almost all these
works devote their attention to Western existential authors instead of the Vietnamese existential thinkers and writers. For example, Nguyen Tien Dung spent most of his dissertation (103 pages of a 193 page long dissertation) introducing Western existential thought through the philosophers Socrates, Augustine, Blaise Pascal, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Jaspers, Marcel, Lev Isaákovich Shestov, Nikolai Berdyaev, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and Paul Tillich, as well as Husserl’s phenomenology, and focus exclusively on themes in Western existentialism. In contrast, he devoted only 26 pages to examining the arrival of European existentialism in Southern Vietnam from 1960s to 1970 and to demonstrating the existence of existential themes in Vietnamese literature during that time, jumping too fast from Thanh Tam Tuyen’s works to Vu Khac Khoan’s, Nguyen Thi Hoang’s, Nguyen Manh Con’s, Thich Duc Nhuan’s, Chan Hanh’s, Minh Duc Hoai Trinh’s, Tran Thi Ng.H’s, Mai Thao’s, Thuy Vu’s, Tuy Hong’s, and Duyen Anh’s with one sentence or several sentences for each author with no explanations of why such existential themes were important to the Vietnamese during that time and how and why such themes were seen differently from those of European existentialism. This is an ironic subversion of their own thesis: that they, in doing this, were introducing and affirming the introduction of more Western-style ideas into Vietnam.11 As a result, they arrive at the conclusions that Vietnam does not have existential thought. What is called “hiện sinh Sài Gòn” [Saigon Existentialism], they argue, is only a bad imitation of Western existentialism. As an imitation of Western existentialism, Vietnamese existential thought cannot keep up with its standard. Its effort to “imitate” its Western original is always a failure. At its best, Vietnamese existential thought is less profound than that of the Westerners. At its worst, Vietnamese existential thought “xuyên tạc” [distorts] Western existentialism. As we have seen, most of the works and articles on the Vietnamese version of Western existentialism examine the influences
of Western existentialism on Vietnamese literature, religions, political practice, and the way of life. Phong Hien, Nguyen Phuc, and Nguyen Tien Dung examined the impact of Western existentialism on Vietnamese literature. Lê Kim Chau and Nguyen Trong Van looked at the import of Western existentialism into Vietnam. These two scholars also studied the influences of Western existentialism on Vietnamese intellectuals’ political thought. Furthermore, Lê Kim Châu investigated the influence of Western existentialism on Vietnamese religions. More importantly, Lê Kim Châu also demonstrated the manifestations of Western existentialism in Vietnamese philosophy scholars’ works. That is, none examined the contributions of the Vietnamese intellectuals to the process of Vietnamization of the central themes in Western existentialism. Though Vietnamese existential philosophy during the period 1954-1975 was influenced by European existentialism, I shall argue, these assessments fail to appreciate the role of Vietnamese culture, especially Buddhism, and Vietnamese concrete social and political contexts in shaping the Vietnamese thinkers’ concerns with specific aspects of Western existentialism and in constituting the Vietnamese existential questions and responses. As a result, according to these assessments, Vietnamese existential philosophy during the period 1954-1975 does not have any value in its own right. A serious problem resulting from not paying attention to the influences of Vietnamese culture on the process of adopting Western existentialism is that these scholars did not understand that there were indigenous existential themes rooted in Vietnamese culture, especially in the country’s classical literature (e.g., Buddhism and Taoism) long before the actual arrival of European existentialism in the 1950s. That is, the Eurocentric view precludes from scholars from considering that Vietnamese Buddhist texts themselves reflect existential concerns.
Second, these interpretations and assessments are narrow because they only recognize existential philosophy as a product of European tradition. They fail to realize the diversity of existential philosophies based on the diversity of lived experiences rooted in social, political, and cultural contexts of different races, countries, and continents. This narrowness leads to a fixed view of recurrent existential topics merely based on the recurrent topics expressed and articulated by male Western existentialists (e.g., Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, Kierkegaard, Jaspers, and Marcel). Even the famous Western and woman existentialist Beauvoir’s reflection on women’s lived experience was omitted by this narrow view. Texts written by the African existential thinker Frantz Fanon are not discussed. The narrow view, therefore, misses other important existential topics experienced and theoretically articulated by white-women, non-white and non-European thinkers based on the latter are different experiences from that of the white male European. These topics are the problems of domination, dehumanization, dependence, independence, revolution, racism, self-other dialectic, recognition, sexism, and cultural alienation. For example, Vietnamese intellectuals experienced the problems of Losing-consciousness-of-Vietnamese-origins and of identity caused by colonization.\textsuperscript{12} Importantly, this narrow view sets up a rigid definition of what philosophical and literary works are existential. On the one hand, the view often considers feelings of anguish, despair, loneliness, and social withdrawal typically recurrent existential topics. As a result, it looks for and collects all sorts of philosophical and literary works that meet this criterion, subsuming them under the category of Vietnamese existentialism. On the other hand, the narrow view misses other existentially social, political, and cultural topics; as a result, it excludes serious existential works reflecting moral, social, and political phenomena. These interpretations and assessments of Vietnamese existential thought, except for that of Lê Kim Châu,\textsuperscript{13} do not examine Vietnamese social and
political existential works published by the journal *Hành trình*—the journal extensively focused on social and political issues that South Vietnam encountered with three core writers Nguyễn Văn Trung, Lý Chính Trung, and Trần Văn Toàn. These thinkers intensively reflected on moral social and political issues such as self-other, recognition, war, peace, revolution, democracy, equality, colonialism, and independence that the Vietnamese were encountering existentially in their everyday life. Nguyễn Văn Trung (Nguyen 1990; Nguyen 1970, 186) and Lý Chính Trung are heavily influenced by both Marxist existentialism and Marxism while Trần Văn Toàn (Tran 1965, 160; Tran 1965, 209; Tran 1965, 290; Tran 1967) is an expert on Marx’s social and political philosophy. That is, this narrow view fails to acknowledge the social and political contribution of Vietnamese existential thought 1954-1975.

In addition, these assessments and interpretations lack a historical “eye” by which I mean a mind that carefully reads texts written by Vietnamese existential thinkers in their historical development of ideas situated in the changing and concrete social, political, and cultural contexts of Vietnam. For example, if one read Nguyen Van Trung’s texts carefully, one should discover that Nguyen Van Trung’s philosophy develops through at least two periods: the early and the late Nguyen Van Trung. The early Nguyen Van Trung (before the fall of Diem regime in 1963), as he reflected in an article written in a form of a memoir *Sartre trong đời tôi* [*Sartre in My Life*] (Nguyen 1969, 233-284) published by the Journal *Bách Khoa* in 1968, enjoyed Sartre’s abstract ontology manifested in Sartre’s early writings (e.g., *Nausea* and especially *Being and Nothingness*). The early Nguyen Van Trung, therefore, tended to introduce Sartre’s ontological ideas into South Vietnam in an abstract form. The early Nguyen Van Trung was more interested in ontology. However, the late Nguyen Van Trung (after the fall of Diem regime in November 1963) was especially interested in Sartre’s social and political philosophy manifested in *Search*
Importantly, the late Nguyen Van Trung enjoyed reading the African existential thinker Frantz Fanon very much (e.g., The Wretched of the Earth). The combined influence from Sartre and Fanon as well as the critically social and political context of Vietnam (e.g., Vietnam War and the decadent social structure of South Vietnam that Nguyen Van Trung himself experienced) changed Nguyen Van Trung’s philosophical priority: from existential ontology to social and political existential philosophy.

The later Nguyen Van Trung was interested in issues such as war, peace, independence, and social revolution. He especially offers a critique of the South Vietnamese social structure and of imperialism which clearly was influenced by Fanon’s works. As Nguyen Van Trung put it, that was the turning point from a meditative attitude to a more politically engaged philosophy [thái độ thương ngắn đến giai đoạn chính trị với thái độ dân thân] (Nguyen 1969, 236). The assessments and interpretations of Vietnamese existential philosophy that associate Vietnamese and Western existentialism with quietism and abstraction are inaccurate because these assessments only to think of existentialism from the early Sartre (e.g., Being and Nothingness) and the early Nguyen Van Trung. Their judgments from one specific work and period were hastily generalized to cover the whole dialectical development of existential thoughts. A moment was absolutized to become a movement. This is the main reason I have been encouraged to explore and emphasize the late Nguyen Van Trung and the moral and political aspects of Vietnamese existential philosophy published by the journal Hành trình.

These critics make many statements without support for their positions. As a result, readers have the feeling of reading a large amount of subjective and passionate sentences and not necessarily well-informed opinion. For example, Lê Kim Châu examines the influence of Western existentialism on Vietnamese religion and states that Vietnamese Buddhists
"existentialize Buddhism to modernize Vietnamese Buddhism;" however, he does not really show how this happened and how Western existentialism and Vietnamese Buddhism were blended. Another example, Lê Kim Chau comments that Nguyen Van Trung applied three mentioned Sartrean themes (e.g., bad faith, good faith, and the look) in his works (Lê 1996, 86-91), but simply lists these themes in Nguyen Van Trung’s works without analyzing them to see what exactly Nguyen Van Trung presented and how these themes were similar and different from Sartre’s themes. As a result, Lê Kim Châu ignores how Nguyen Van Trung reconstructed Vietnamese Western existentialism.

On the problem of methodology, besides Nguyen Phuc, almost all the mentioned Vietnamese scholars cannot identify any contributions of existential thought in Vietnam. The shared view of all the mentioned scholars is that there is not a genuine existentialism in Vietnam during the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, and they all judge existentialism in Vietnam from their narrowly interpreted Marxist approach with a fixed prejudice against it, which associates existentialism in Vietnam with Ngo Dinh Diem’s government and the American regime in South Vietnam. They thus considered existentialism as a means by which the Republic of Vietnam in the South resisted the communist regime in the North and the Communist Revolution of the country both in the North and the South. It is considered a theory that actually resists and opposes Marxism. As a result, the profundity of existentialism, including its Marxist history in the West, was not carefully examined and fairly judged by Vietnamese scholars after 1975. Existentialism was, in other words, seen more from narrowly defined political concerns rather than from the standpoint of philosophy. Lê Kim Châu clearly associated existential thought in Vietnam with American neo-colonialism in the South: "the fall of American troops in 1968 and then the fall of the Southern Republic of Vietnam in 1975 ended the arrival, introduction, and application of
existentialism in the South, which lasted for more than 20 years” (Lê Lim Châu 1996, 100).

Another problem is that most of these works demonstrate negative impacts of Western existentialism on Vietnam in order to remove the so-called cultural product of American neo-colonialism in South Vietnam from 1945 to 1975. As a result, the positive influences of Western existentialism on Vietnamese culture have not received attention. Nguyen Phuc is the only person who focused on the positive impact of Western existentialism on Vietnamese literature before 1975. The positive influences of Western existentialism in other fields, especially philosophy, religion, politics, and practical life are still in the dark.

Contemporary Vietnamese assessments of Vietnamese existential thought during the period of 1954-1975 are one-sided because they judge Vietnamese existential thought during the period of 1954-1975 from a Marxist approach only. Marxism is considered a scientific truth in Vietnam, i.e., correct knowledge that corresponds to the reality it reflects and held as the standard from which to measure all other assessments of Vietnamese thought. As a result, these assessments lead to the fact that non-Marxist schools of thought, especially existential philosophy, are considered as non-scientific, i.e., incorrect knowledge that reflects wrongly the reality of Vietnamese thought, or as backward knowledge, which reflects a backward reality of Vietnam. When Vietnamese existential thought during the period of 1954-1975 is assessed with such a Eurocentric, one-sided and narrow view, critics suggest that it should be removed from Vietnamese culture. The basic and shared problem of the mentioned works on the topic at hand appears to me that their authors already decided that their narrowly defined kind of Marxism is the absolute truth and that Vietnamese existentialism is ill-advised, before they did their research and wrote their dissertations and articles. If we consider Marxism as a kind of philosophy among many other philosophies and that, like other philosophies, Marxism contains important
contributions and has its own limitations, we will then be opened to the richness of approaches to
the topic at hand. It is important as contemporary inclusive philosophers, that we avoid a view
that there is one and only one absolute truth. Marx, in fact, holds that truth is progressive. As a
result, Marxism should not be considered a complete, absolute, and without room for
improvement system. It should be developed and enriched by its openness and interaction with
other philosophies.

A New Approach

To avoid these pitfalls, I suggest that the Eurocentric approach should be investigated and
criticized. One way to de-center the Eurocentric view is to suspend the rigid definition of
existentialism found within the European existentialist body of literature as the standard by
examining closely the original texts written by Vietnamese existential scholars and writers to
discover how existentialism is defined from within the Vietnamese existentialist body of
literature. By doing so, we can find the distinctive features, contributions, and limitations of
existential thought in Vietnam from within Vietnamese society, culture, and philosophy. Instead
of applying the external definition of existentialism, we can explore indigenous Vietnamese
existential philosophy.14 As a philosopher I seek to conduct research, build philosophical
hypotheses, modify and justify hypotheses, by drawing from original, primary sources as the
foundation of my research. This way, Vietnamese existential philosophy can define itself by and
through its own, actual dialectical body of literature. We should delay declaring whether
Vietnamese existential philosophy should be rejected until a long, hard, and fair analysis of
Vietnamese existential texts is conducted. This study abandons the approach that moves from
the universal (i.e., existentialism in general) to the particular (i.e., Vietnamese existential philosophy). Instead, it shall offer an approach grounded in the particularities of Vietnamese culture.

Second, previous research of both Western and Vietnamese existential philosophies (i.e., secondary texts) should be examined along with systematic analyses of primary texts. Judgments produced by secondary texts should never be taken for granted or regarded as truths and foundations from which one builds one's study. That is, every previous affirmation of primary texts is questionable.

Third, to avoid the one-sided view, a priori ontological claims should be discarded. By a priori ontological claim, I mean accounts of existence absolutized as the truth of about existence. Philosophical theories should be regarded as meanings that uncover reality from different perspectives. By and through constant interrogating different aspects of reality, reality is perpetually approximated. To broaden one's approach and to be tolerant of different views, I suggest revisiting Buddhist dialectic logic and considering the standpoint of Absolute Emptiness (i.e., Sunya¹⁵ as zero) seriously.¹⁶ At the same time, I recognize that it is difficult to avoid judging a philosophy without a specific philosophical stance. The stance one takes should also be subject to critique when one examines other types of philosophy. As Vietnamese existential Buddhism holds, reality is perpetually approximated through multiple perspectives offered by multiple approaches. I shall therefore draw upon Buddhist, Taoist, Marxist, feminist, phenomenological, and existential approaches.

Fourth, this study offers a grounded approach to Vietnamese existential philosophy. I regard philosophy as a human endeavor to understand reality, and as one way to restore reality as it really is in our understanding. The Vietnamese see being as inter-being: the self is defined by
the Other and in its relations with the Other. This philosophical view has guided the behaviors of Vietnamese people in every aspect of their everyday life. Because being necessarily manifests itself in inter-being in Vietnamese lived experience, Vietnamese reflections upon being are shared reflections. That is why we find a harmonious hybrid of literature, history, and philosophy (truyện thông văn-sử-tríết bát phân) throughout the history of Vietnamese thought (e.g., Nguyen Du’s the Tale of Kieu.) I have tried so many times to apply Western ways to study Vietnamese thought to draw a clear-cut distinction amongst different disciplines and different topics. I have gradually realized that this intention tends to distort the fluidity of the subject I have been examining. I have realized that I have to overcome the idea of a clear-cut distinction amongst disciplines, and between theory and practice, in order to preserve the fluidity of Vietnamese philosophy as a reflection upon the Vietnamese way of life. Just like Zen masters who meditate to overcome fixed ways of thinking, to return to reality with a fresh look, and to say what their minds "see," I have observed and described what I am reflecting upon. I have looked at philosophical, religious, literary, historical, and autobiographical texts, Vietnamese poetry and diaries, as well as Vietnamese social behaviors in order to fully understand Vietnamese existential philosophy.

Throughout this study, I will argue that Vietnamese Existential philosophy is a reflection upon Being and upon the Vietnamese lived experiences, which centralizes the questions "Who Am I?" and "What Should I do?" A human self, Vietnamese existentialists argue, is constituted by and through constituting the Other. Thus, to understand who the self is, Vietnamese existential philosophy shifts to the question "Who is the Other?" They understand the Other in different levels: another individual, a social group or social class, the social structure one lives in, and the whole environment. In their quest for who the Other is, they discover the Vietnamese
society as crisis and violence. Thus to cultivate and realize an authentic self, the Vietnamese existential thinkers argue for a social revolution to change this violent social structure. Vietnamese existential philosophy concerns the ontological, the moral, and the political self, arguing for a strong and responsible self-in-the-making. The mutual constitution of the self, the Other, and the society is based on the freedom of individual choice in harmonious relations with the Other, based on mutual recognition.

Lived Experiences and the Diversity of Existential Philosophy

Existentialists take lived-experiences seriously, and many argue for an appreciation of both one’s lived-experiences and those of others. Lived experiences are experiences gained through one's actual involvement in the world from the first person perspective. The diversity of existential thought is produced by lived experiences. Lived experiences are different among individuals, nations, regions, and continents. Existential thought thus expresses itself in different forms in different philosophers, countries, and continents. Many scholars argue that there are different aspects focused on among different existentialists. I argue that lived experiences are the foundation of reflection; which on one hand constitutes the essential structures of human existence, and on the other hand, diversifies them. Existential philosophy, in my view, is the reflection upon lived experience.

No one can avoid death. As a result, the lived experience of inevitable death is the most common structure of human existence to men and women regardless of nationality or race, though understandings of death vary from culture to culture. Since existential philosophy is concerned with lived experience, it cannot ignore the anxiety over death as an essential mode of
human existence. Different forms of existentialism reflect upon this particular concern, which Heidegger refers to as care, to explore the essential structure of the human condition.

Although this study concerns Vietnamese and Eastern thought, it might be instructive to compare death-bound concerns with another group of people who have been treated as external to the Western episteme, such as African Americans. The lived experiences of African American people are different in comparison with Oriental and European people besides the most common issue—death. Blackness becomes one of the most dominant issues in their lived experience. Lewis Gordon indicates that in Europe, “there were both anxieties over the future and boredom over passions that were dying,” while racial problems and dynamics of historical agency are dominating concerns among African Americans (Gordon 2000, 7). The Vietnamese people have experienced more than 1,000 years of invasion and domination by other countries (i.e., China, France, and the United States of America). Oppression, independence, liberation, and freedom have become the most frequent existential concerns for the Vietnamese. Vietnamese existential philosophy, as a result, tends to discuss this issue intensively in their theories of Self-Other, mutual recognition, and social revolution as a means to realize their ideal self and a just society rather than to discuss the issue of blackness that African people experience. European Christians experienced the question of faith in God. This question of faith in God does not seriously emerge for the Vietnamese since the Vietnamese do not have a transcendental God but a harmonious relation between self-other and human and nature though many of them are Catholics (e.g., Lý Chánh Trung, Nguyen Van Trung).

Lived-experiences also vary between genders. Take Vietnamese existential thought as an example. In past Vietnamese society, men took political issues as their life task while women were tied to domestic and emotional life such as being lovers, wives, mothers, daughters, and the
like. These different lived experiences are reflected in Vietnamese political theories and literature. Almost all Vietnamese existential male writers and scholars take the issue of national independence and political freedom from foreign domination as their main theme. The interest in social and political issues is reflected clearly in Nguyen Van Trung's works. Furthermore, from 1954 to 1975, Vietnamese male writers encountered a critical despair in terms of ideological impasses. They doubted both Marxism and the South Vietnamese governments' mode of society. The war between Vietnam and the United States had become crueler. Death happened every day to anyone without prediction. All they saw was a dark future and a desperate present. These lived experiences were reflected intensively in the works of Vietnamese male existential writers such as Thanh Tam Tuyen and Duyen Anh.17

Vietnamese women’s lived experiences were partly politically marginalized. Sharing the experiences of death with the male writers, their lives partly were more focused on the domestic sphere such as being good girls, obedient daughters, wives, and caring mothers rather than on politics, though this observation does not mean there were no woman writers concerned with political choices during the war. The Vietnamese existential female writers were able to address these unfair religious and moral regulations and reflected their rejection to these existing unfair values. Vietnamese women who were existential writers, therefore, argue for freedom from social, moral, and religious constraints based on one core value, namely, human mutual love. In almost all literary works created by women Vietnamese existential writers, mutual love is the basis and core value to adopt and establish other values. Minh Đức Hoài Trinh, Lê Hằng, Nguyễn Thị Hoàng, and other female writers present the same motif: mutual love is the most important reason to awaken human beings from the meaningless world to create a subjectively
meaningful world anew by living their lives following the call of love and reject backward, strict, and inhumane rules that constrain human freedom and mutual love.\textsuperscript{18}
CHAPTER 2

VIETNAMESE BUDDHISM AS A MODE OF EXISTENTIAL PHILOSOPHY

In this chapter I wish to show that Vietnamese Buddhism is a mode of existential philosophy. I will start by addressing criticisms of Vietnamese Buddhism that argue that Vietnamese Buddhism cannot be considered existentialist because of its tendency toward quietism --- the withdrawal of the human being from the world of practical affairs. According to this view, Buddhism is quietist because it characterizes the world as a world of impermanence and illusion and it sets as the goal of Enlightenment escape from the world of illusion to attain a state of “no-mind” or emptiness. I shall call this interpretation of Buddhism the naïve interpretation. I shall distinguish the naïve version of Buddhism from what I shall call the sophisticated version, showing that the sophisticated view – a view that actually corresponds to the practice of Buddhism in Vietnam – establishes a role for human agency in the world of practical affairs. I will then discuss important existentialist themes in Vietnamese Buddhism: ontological conceptions of the nature of reality, accounts of human agency, freedom, and responsibility, one's relation to the other, and the conception of death. I shall conclude with two aspects of Vietnamese Buddhist practice that support and help to constitute Vietnamese Buddhism: the Buddhist approach to dialectical, multi-valent thinking and the technique of meditation.

In support of this argument I hope to show that Vietnamese Buddhism is a reflection on human lived experience that reveals the structure of reality as a unity of temporal and spatial aspects and that it discloses the structure of human existence. Vietnamese Buddhism explains the human self as an "inter-being" (Nhật Hạnh 2002) constituted by one’s bodily actions,
thought, and language and by involvement with others in communities and the environment. I shall examine Vietnamese Buddhist texts written by Thích Nhất Hạnh (1926-), Thích Minh Chau (d.b. unknown-?), Thích Đức Huân (1923-2002), Tue Sy (1941-), and Cao Ngọc Phuang (1938-). I shall also refer to medieval Vietnamese texts in the collection of Buddhist writings known as Thiền Uyên Tập Anh and older texts in the Sanskrit and Pali canons.

The Naïve Interpretation of Buddhism

That Buddhism is a form of quietism is a common understanding of Buddhism in both the East and the West. In The Ethics of Ambiguity, for example, Simone de Beauvoir writes:

As long as there have been men and they have lived, they have all felt this tragic ambiguity of their condition, but as long as there have been philosophers and they have thought, most of them have tried to mask it. They have striven to reduce mind to matter, or to reabsorb matter into mind, or to merge them within a single substance. Those who have accepted the dualism have established a hierarchy between body and soul which permits of considering as negligible the part of the self which cannot to be saved. They have denied death, either by integrating it with life or by promising to man immortality. Or again they have denied life, considering it as a veil of illusion beneath which is hidden the truth of Nirvana (Beauvoir 1948 (1976)7-8).

Similarly, Hazel Barnes writes, "What disturbs me about Zen is that it seems to me to preclude the creation of a value system, both because of its denial of temporality and because it allows for no real sense of responsibility" (Barnes 1967, 274). She continues, "Much of what I object to in Eastern philosophy stems from two basic positions: its view of ‘desire’ and its attitude toward human relations. Vedanta strives to uproot desire as being but an ignorant attachment to the world of Maya. The result is an extreme asceticism and quietism." [Italics added] (Barnes 1976, 274). A similar position is taken by the contemporary Vietnamese
existentialist, Nguyen Van Trung, who has been heavily influenced by Sartrean and Camusian philosophies.

I do not deny that there are features of quietism to be found in some versions of Buddhism in general. However, Buddhism is very diverse. It is my view that Vietnamese Buddhism, in particular the version of Buddhism espoused by the Vietnamese Zen Buddhist Thích Nhất Hạnh, is immune to the criticism.

I shall begin with an examination of Nguyen Van Trung’s interpretation of Buddhism in his book *Biến chủng Giải thoát trong Phật giáo* [Buddhist Dialectic of Liberation] (1958). Nguyen Van Trung’s understanding of Buddhism actually contains elements of both the naïve and the sophisticated versions of Buddhism. As we shall see, Nguyen Van Trung acknowledges that Vietnamese Buddhism embraces the abstract notion of human freedom; what he does not want to acknowledge is the connection between Vietnamese Buddhism and concrete practical action a world of social and political change.

We can begin to understand Nguyen Van Trung’s by noting his claim that Buddhism regards the world as, in a fundamental sense, illusory. Nguyen Van Trung claims that the phenomenal world is a world of meanings constituted by the empirical consciousness which, on his view, is a false consciousness. He writes “Beings are changing things: existence becomes non-existence or beings become nothing. They change from non-existence to existence. They are phenomena that are not true existence. True existence is unchanged and permanent” (Nguyễn 1958, 49). Nguyen Van Trung described the world metaphorically as a cloud that covers the bright moon. The cloud is ignorance that prevents human beings from seeing the truth. In order to see the moon as it really is, the cloud must be destroyed. Therefore, the task of
Buddhism, according to Nguyen Van Trung, is to destroy the false consciousness leads us to confuse the impermanent the world for reality.

Nguyen Van Trung’s claim that Buddhism views the world as illusion is problematic because Nguyen Van Trung confuses Buddhism’s dialectical view of existence with ignorance. By Buddhism’s dialectical view of existence, I mean that Buddhism views the world, not as illusory, but as impermanent and changing and, further, that to understand the world as an impermanent flow of reality is enlightenment, which is to say, the antithesis of ignorance. Ignorance consists in the failure to grasp the impermanence of existence, which is itself is a result of seeing oneself as a certain form of substance. Self-attachment (the self here can be the substance of object or subject) leads to a failure of being able to release one's self or one's standpoint to the movement. Ignorance, in this sense, is a form of slavery caused by a belief in and an attachment of an unchanging self. Ignorance is bad since it is a core cause of suffering. On this point, the Vietnamese Buddhist scholar Tue Sy writes: “If one is surprised by the constant changing of existence, one’s view of life is full of anguish and disappointment” (Tue Sy 1965, 33). Tue Sy finds within the Western style of existential poetry which influenced the Vietnamese existential poetry of the 1950s-1970s the expression of despair, which he writes: “is just like human’s cry on the face of the broken world. Such kind of poetry does not offer man a way out but pulls man back [to despair]. This is another form of alienation” (Tue Sy 1965, 33).

The context of Tue Sy’s work is important. Tue Sy’s article was written in 1965 during a period when the cruelty of the Vietnam War was dramatically increased. What the Vietnamese needed especially during this period was a stronger mind that was able to go beyond the dehumanized world of war. In that context, Tue Sy saw in the Vietnamese Buddhist tradition as
offering the possibility of a strong and resilient spirit. He quoted the Buddhist Master Van Hanh’s famous lines

The body is like a blink of sunset
Leaves are so green during spring and fall down in autumn
The changing of life is not a big deal,
It is as light as dew dropping on a leaf.22 (Tue Sy 1965, 33)

The poetry supports the idea that enlightenment is the seeing of reality as it really. The enlightened one should feel calm rather than despair and disappointment when facing the vicissitudes of the world. The verse implies that the man who is surprised in the face of changing existence is ignored. As we shall see later, most Vietnamese Buddhists argue against taking refuge in absolute freedom.

Similar positions are advanced by contemporary Vietnamese Buddhists Thích Nhật Hạnh and Thích Minh Chau (Nhật Hạnh 1964, 73-81; Minh Châu 1969, 1970; Minh Chau 1990, 202) as well as by Buddhists throughout the history of Vietnam. If we look at their writings we see general agreement on the following points:

First, their starting point is lived experience. In more familiar words to the West, existence precedes essence. This has specific meanings for them. The medieval Vietnamese Buddhists Trí Thiền Sư, Văn Phong, Đại Hội, and Quảng Ngãi held that the way to end the circle of birth and death is in actively engaging in one's own living in this earthy world. The Vietnamese Buddhists denied the view that one is able to end the circle of birth and death with a belief in an eternal, unchanging, absolute world such as Nirvana, or heaven or hell. In a conversation with Trí Thiền, who lived and experienced enlightenment at Phúc Hóa pagoda, Quảng Ngãi asked:

"Quang Ngai: what is the reason for the non birth and non death?
Trí Thiền: Non birth and non death can only be grasped in the chain of birth and death.
Quang Ngãi: That means that there is no birth
Trí Thiện: You got it!” (Nguyen 1967, 370-371)

Quang Nghiêm's answer "That means that there is no birth" is meant to imply several things. First, birth and death are symbiotic. If there is birth, then, there necessarily is death. In this sense, birth and death are essential structures of relative beings from a relative standpoint. I would call the relative standpoint a standpoint of moment. In the standpoint of moment one sees oneself, others, and the world from one’s own perspective only. Second, Quang Nghiêm's insight is that if there is no birth; then, there is necessarily no death. The very move from the idea of birth and death and the idea of non-birth and non-death actually is a turn from relative standpoint to absolute standpoint. I would name the latter the standpoint of movement, which is equal with the standpoint of sunyata/absolute Nothingness. From the absolute standpoint, there is only the absolute. It identifies with itself. However, the absolute is not a simple absolute that is empty. It includes unlimited multiplicity of relative single individual objects, aspects, meanings, relative standpoints, and theories in itself. In this sense, it is full of contents which are unlimited forms of specific concrete things. The standpoint of movement can be seen from ontological and epistemological perspectives. From the former angle, it is existence in its full form. From the latter perspective, it is a method that enables an observer to release his or her own perspective and bias in order to expand one’s horizon to the unlimited openness and join the fluidity of perspectives to constantly approximate reality as it really is.

When Quang Nghiêm replies “That means that there is no birth,” he makes a move from the standpoint of moment to the standpoint of movement. Here, birth and death can be seen as two moments in one’s life. By releasing his moments of birth and death to the standpoint of movement, he joins the unlimited constant changing flow of life without falling into one or several moments. By constantly transforming each moment of life to the movement of life, he
does not see birth as birth and death as death in the same way as from the standpoint of birth or
death.

Readers familiar with Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* can relate my analysis of Trí Thiệnn and Quảng Nghiem with Hegel’s example of the relationship between the particular and
universal in the chapter on "Sense Certainty." The standpoint of moment can be seen as Hegel’s
here and now or the particular. The standpoint of movement can be seen as the particular
constantly in the process of joining the movement of the Spirit as a whole.

The point is made by the Vietnamese Buddhist Thich Minh Chau. In his book,
*Enlightening Ourselves* “Nghĩa của chữ Không trong Đạo Phật nguyên thủy” [The meaning of
*Sannyata* in Primitive Buddhism], Thich Minh Chau claims that *Sannyata* means to see reality as it
really is. If one observes reality and sees a tree, one says one sees the tree. If one observes
oneself and sees one’s desires for certain things, one says one sees the desires in oneself. To
attain *Sannyata* is to see all things, including the variety of human desires as aspects of a larger
reality. The problem arises not in thinking that reality is always changing but rather in taking
one perspective on reality and construing it as the only true reality. When one adopts such an
attitude, one fails to see the constant fluidity and transformation of each form of reality to other
forms in an unlimited network of interdependency. This, in, Thich Minh Chau’s own
terminology, is a form of slavery to an object (Minh Chau 1969, 112-117; Minh Chau 1990).
But this does not amount to saying, as Nguyen Van Trung does, that seeing the world as
changing amounts to saying that the world phenomenal world is illusory and hence a source of
ignorance.

Nguyen Van Trung’s second naïve interpretation of Buddhism rests also in his
understanding of the so-called second and third holy truths of Buddhism, that desire is the cause
of all suffering, and that the path to liberation from suffering is the elimination of desire. On
Nguyen Van Trung’s view the idea of eliminating all desire entails – the desire for living, the
desire for not living, the desire for enlightenment, the desire for liberation from suffering, the
desire to act morally, the desire to act immorality, even the desire to desire. He believes that the
ultimate goal of Buddhism is purity of action without any desire or motivation, and that to
achieve this one must destroy all types of desire. Such a view is what Barnes criticizes when she
says that "Vedanta strives to uproot desire" (Barnes 1967, 274).

Is it true that Buddhism negates human emotions and feelings from the path to
enlightenment? This question is related to another aspect of Nguyen Van Trung’s interpretation
of Buddhism. Nguyen Van Trung argues that Buddhist liberation ends up with taking refuge in
absolute freedom and remains in rest: “Buddhism… wanted to help human beings to attain
*Nibbana*, to the ultimate rest, peace, and quietness” (Nguyễn 1958, 207). On Nguyen Van
Trung’s view, “*Nibbana* is complete and empty of contents, completely separated from the
relative, practical life” (Nguyễn 1958, 215-216). Nirvana, according to Nguyen Van Trung is a
“state of absolute freedom where human beings live as the absolute freedom, which means
human beings re-find their true and authentic selves” (Nguyen 1958, 206). On Nguyen Van
Trung’s account, after attaining enlightenment, one remains inactive (Nguyen 1958, 206).

I shall return shortly to the question of whether, on the Vietnamese Buddhist view,
freedom may be thought of in a more dynamic way as an ever-changing state of becoming but let
me also highlight in this connection Nguyen Van Trung’s understanding of absolute nothingness
as the emptiness of any content whatsoever, void of any emotion, feelings, sensations, thoughts,
concepts, and intension. It is Nguyen Van Trung’s view that one must destroy human emotions,
feelings, and thoughts in during the path of enlightenment order to attain an empty mind. This is
accomplished by keeping precepts [gioi], meditating, [dinh], and focusing on the goal of enlightenment [hue], all of which involve the refusal of sensuous pleasures and, indeed, the refusal of the will itself by promoting an “indifferent” consciousness whose ultimate goal is to be still (Nguyễn 1958, 103 -127, 205). Related to this, Nguyen Van Trung's argues that Buddhist liberation is essentially the liberation of the mind.

On Nguyen Van Trung’s view, then, to be free is to attain Absolute Emptiness in which one is not bothered by the changing world. We can now see that how it is that Nguyen Van Trung embraces the view that enlightenment excludes participation in social and political change and, in that sense, is a form of quietism. If, as Nguyen Van Trung has it, this life is illusory and one concentrates on it only out of ignorance, it does not deserve our attention to struggle for it, attend to our desires in it, and seek to engage in direct practical action for change. Buddhism cannot be understood as a social doctrine (Nguyễn 1958, 215).

Nguyễn Văn Trung is quite explicit on this point, writing, “In the present time everywhere people prefer organizing social organizations on a scientific basis. I do not understand that preference if this need for ‘adjustment’ leads many Vietnamese Buddhist leaders to think that social changes are the immediate mission of Buddhism instead of liberation to Nibbana” (Nguyễn 1958, 216-217). He claims that, "in switching the task, Buddhism has lost its specialty as a theory of spiritual liberation in which there are no positive and negative states of mind" (Nguyễn 1958, 216-217). Nguyen Van Trung aims is to relegate Buddhism to a purely religious role.

This is quite a different position from that of Vietnamese Buddhists such as Thích Nhất Hạnh and Thích Minh Chau who actively advocated for Buddhism as a philosophy that promotes and mobilizes social change. During the period of the 1950s-1970s, Vietnamese Buddhism did
not mention Nirvana as often as Nguyen Van Trung did. They also offered different interpretations of some of Buddhism’s central concepts. Thích Nhất Hạnh, for example, argued Absolute Emptiness is not devoid of any content whatsoever, but rather should be understood is a kind of dialectical thinking that does not absolutize any standpoint as the correct view. These Buddhists also did not ascribe to the view that liberation is essentially the freedom of the mind from contents. Their concept of freedom encompassed rather the notion of freedom of the mind from a self-attached view, freedom from oppression and domination, and freedom to realize one’s ideal self by and through political actions illuminated by political theory. Thích Nhất Hạnh in particular advocated a third-way of approaching a social revolution in South Vietnam (negotiating the difference between capitalism and communist revolution (Nhật Hạnh 1967). He and Cao Ngọc Phuong became outspoken activists in the struggle for peace (Cao 1993). Let us now turn to some of these developments in what I am calling sophisticated Buddhism.

The Sophisticated Reading of Buddhism

What is interesting about Nguyen Van Trung’s writing is that, though he espouses a version of what I have called naïve Buddhism in his earlier writings in connection with the stance of quietism, he later advances certain elements of what I would call sophisticated Buddhism, notably in certain of his discussion of human freedom. I think that Nguyen Van Trung was wrong about quietism but I believe that he does have something important to say about human freedom.

Nguyễn Văn Trung’s writings on human freedom are connected with his interpretation of Buddhism as humanism. By humanism he means the theory (1) that, descriptively speaking,
freedom is part of human nature; (2) that, from a normative point of view, human beings ought to be free; (3) that humanism reveals the slavery of human beings, (4) that the goal of humanism is to liberate humanity, (5) that in the course of liberation, humanity is the highest goal, and (6) that humanity must provide the motivating force that achieves and realizes freedom in practice. Under this interpretation, Nguyen Van Trung characterizes Vietnamese Buddhism as implying a certain sort of activism and presents human beings as agents who are responsible for their present situation as well as agents with the capability to change their situation. Clearly, this is a position at odds with his quietist account of Buddhism.

Nguyen Van Trung argues that in Buddhism, there is no conception of God as the Creator of the universe. Nor do we find in Buddhism the idea of the human being as being image or a product of God. Rather, human beings create themselves by and through their everydayness of thinking, perceiving, feeling, desiring, and doing, as well as in their interacting with others. Since we have the creative power of ourselves, we also have the ability to change ourselves and our situation. This aspect of Buddhism explains why, during critical moments when Vietnam as a nation was invaded and dominated by the French, the Japanese, and the Americans, at times when Vietnamese people were enslaved and every aspect of their lives – politics, politics, economics, culture, philosophy, and religion – were compromised, there have been revivals of the Buddhist movement. Buddhist theory offers the possibility of new methods of thinking and of ways of realizing liberation. Buddhism offered modes of understanding human freedom and the responsibility of human beings to change their situations. Nguyen Van Trung writes:

In this sense, Buddhism appears as a hopeful belief because anyone taking liberation as a goal, necessarily attains the goal. There is no obstacle that can prevent man on the way to his liberation. Hopeful thinking [Vietnamese = tin trưởng lạc quan] bases itself on a necessary victory. There cannot be a failure because man is not determined by external factors. Man with a strong will will conquer all barriers that he sets for himself. There is no Fate, which means
impersonal force and external factors that can violate and constrain one's free will and freedom are outside his consciousness. Hope is based on the fact that man is not a victim of Fate, who cannot do anything but accept the Fate's dictates that were convicted at the beginning of mankind. [Italic added] (Nguyễn 1958, 165)

Now in citing this aspect of Nguyen Van Trung’s thought, I do not want to endorse it completely. The distinguishing feature of Buddhist theory, Nguyen Van Trung writes, is that it "considers that the search for the Tao and exercise of the Tao is the task of cognition only. It excludes all types of emotions" [italic added] (Nguyễn 1958, 86-87). I agree with Nguyen Van Trung that the way to liberation is mainly associated with cognitive consciousness (jnana) called satori or enlightenment. However, Nguyen Van Trung's claim on liberation through cognition only seems too strong and not in conformity with the actual practice of Vietnamese Buddhism. Thích Nhất,Hạnh and Cao Ngọc Phuong, for example, became activists during the Vietnamese Buddhist struggle for peace (Cao 1993) so, at least insofar as their actions were concerned they saw no conflict between political engagement and Buddhism. What we need to understand is just how this connection is enabled on a theoretical level.

Let us analyze Nguyen Van Trung's claim that Buddhism regards the human being as free. Nguyen Van Trung advances his account in connection with a Sartrean theory of freedom. Nguyen Van Trung praises the Sartrean idea that one makes oneself who one is and that there is no essence before existence. “Man creates himself through his actions. Actions include freedom of choice and a goal. Man is free to choose and free to pursue his goal” (Nguyễn 1958, 191). Nguyen Van Trung acknowledges that one cannot refuse one’s conditions into which one was born. By realizing the situations, one becomes aware of the situation one is in one does not have to identify with that situation because one is more than situation. Nguyen Van Trung quotes Sartre’s les Mouches to support the idea that “the freedom to choose or refuse one’s attitude
toward life does not depend on objective moral principles or God, but is created by man himself in his concrete situations” (Nguyễn 1958, 192).

The Buddhist theory of human freedom is complementary to the Sartrean idea. Buddhism regards human beings as free to choose one’s actions, to create one’s situations and to be responsible for one’s present situations. The course of the path to liberation from these situations in Buddhism is secured in the Buddhist theories of causal relation and Karma (Nguyễn 1958, 193-194). Nguyen Van Trung writes

Buddhism puts fate in the hands of the individual: karma is not caused by any external force or power that forces one to act but by one’s own actions. We create our karma. Therefore, we can change the karma by and through our actions. Our life is good or bad, we are a good or bad person, and success or failure in liberation is completely determined by our own actions. (Nguyễn 1958, 194)

I agree with Nguyen Van Trung that one’s situations is constituted by desires but that human freedom involves the choice to act following desire or not, a choice affected by what kind of attitude one takes in any given situation. But what types of actions that cause karma and what do not? As we have seen, Nguyen Van Trung's holds the view that the core cause of suffering is desire. On Nguyen Van Trung’s view, desire causes results that pile up in one’s karma. In order to escape karma, one has to learn to act without desire. He calls such act “pure action” (Nguyễn 1958, 195-196). Can one act without desire or any intention at all? Nguyen Van Trung argues that human beings have the freedom to destroy desire. Freedom is the ability to destroy desire:

Buddhist sutra mentions desire-destroying many times. Freedom is the ability to destroy [desire]. Freedom is the condition that determines karmic actions; as a result, it [freedom] is also the mean to destroy all the thought that cause actions to self-determine. This is pure freedom. If one wants liberation, one must destroy all forms of desire, destroy all types of attachment to existence, to common belief and truth understood by most people [base on their false belief in different forms of self. (Nguyễn 1958, 201-202)
According to Nguyen Van Trung, “Man has freedom to choose. If he decides to act according to his desire, then his actions will cause karmic result that constrain him to the cycle of karma; if desire is destroyed, actions will not cause karmic result. As a result, he will escape impermanence” (Nguyễn 1958, 95-96).

Though I agree that Buddhism provides for the possibility of human freedom, I cannot find in Nguyen Van Trung an explanation of how this freedom is possible. How is it possible for a Buddhist to choose to act following or refusing his desire if desire is ruled out the equation? There is a fundamental contradiction between the idea of human freedom and total exclusion of desire. Nor does Nguyen Van Trung give an account of how freedom – of the sort that he describes – is possible when humanity is constrained by external conditions and situations. The problem lies in Nguyen Van Trung’s conception of freedom as absolute freedom. He assumes that freedom is absolute and that the starting point of liberation is absolute freedom. My own view, which I think is supported by Vietnamese Buddhism, is that freedom is not the starting point but the goal, a goal that is realized and achieved during the struggle for liberation in oneself and with and for others.

Nguyen Van Trung inherits Sartre’s view that the human being is free, but Nguyen Van Trung does not provide theoretical support for the idea that one is simply granted absolute freedom when one is born and that one can destroy at will or do whatever one wants with it. Sartre provides his theory of consciousness to argue that consciousness is nothingness. That is, freedom is the very core feature of human consciousness. As a result, one is condemned to be free because one’s consciousness is nothingness. There are not any types of self or ego in one’s consciousness in which one can take refuge in Sartrean philosophy.25 I shall return to the possibility that freedom is compatible with Vietnamese Buddhism shortly.
In considering Nguyen Van Trung, however, let me mention a related concern. Both modern Western existentialism and Buddhism offer theories not only of negative but also of positive freedom. In existentialist thought negation to nothingness is the first step to negative freedom; in traditional Buddhist thought the first step to negative freedom the freedom to destroy desire. Then, both traditions arrive at their positive theory of freedom: freedom to create something from nothing. At this point, however, modern Western existentialism and Buddhism part ways. The Sartrean view of freedom ends in failure since the being-for-itself can never reach absolute freedom (the pole of transcendence) but is stuck in between the two poles of being-in-itself and being-for-itself. Nguyen Van Trung and Thich Duc Nhuan criticize the Sartrean view of freedom at this juncture: “in this sense, one’s life is a failure and “man is a useless passion…. Consciousness necessarily leads to anguish and at the same time it fails to end anguish and anxiety because it cannot achieve its project to unity with being-in-itself” (Nguyễn 1958, 203).26 Thus, according the Nguyen Van Trung, in Sartrean existentialism, “Man fails to achieve his authentic self” (Nguyễn 1958, 205).

In contrast, Buddhism not only offers a negative sense of freedom as freedom to destroy desire, but, according to Nguyen Van Trung, Buddhism also offers a view of freedom that assists one in returning and re-attaining one’s authentic self or Buddhahood because, at the end of the journey, when one is able to achieve one’s true self, one is at peace. Here, by peace Nguyen Van Trung means the cessation of impermanent existence and desire for other objects in existence. Peace is not absolute nothingness. The meaning of liberation is an effort to destroy desire, to destroy illusions so that the true-self is revealed. The liberated human being is the one who finds his or her own translucent, satisfactory self, attaining absolute freedom and not depending on any external factors (Nguyễn 1958, 205). Nguyen Van Trung claims that Buddhism offers methods
as external means to liberation but the core means to liberation is the human being himself.

“Liberation lies in the practice of Buddha’s teaching. This is the distinguishing feature of Buddhism” [italic added] (Nguyen 1958, 105). Buddha is just like other individuals who find their own ways for liberation. "Buddhism is a method to liberation that is implemented by the individual himself.” (Nguyen 1958, 111) That is, individuals are the starting point of liberation. The cause of liberation depends on the human being as a free subject to choose to act and realize liberation.

With these points about the freedom to make oneself as an individual in mind, I shall now turn to several core existentialist themes and to put forth the argument that Vietnamese Buddhism can in fact be understood as a mode of existential philosophy and humanism.

General Ontological Matters

What is the nature of reality? One way to approach the matter is to consider the way in which entities manifest themselves in terms of both presence and absence.27 The Vietnamese Buddhist Thích Nhật Hạnh argues that the absence of something (i.e., something’s not being apprehended) does not mean that it does not exist. An absent thing is simply something that is not present at this place and at this time. In other places and at other times an absent thing can manifest itself if and when certain conditions are met (Nhật Hạnh 2002, 94). Take as example radio news broadcast in a room without a radio. A radio news broadcast cannot manifest itself to someone in a room if there is no radio to transmit them. The radio waves exist in the room just waiting for one more condition, the presence of a radio that will allow the waves to present themselves in the form of radio news to the person sitting in the room. Similarly, sunflowers and
dragonflies are not seen during winter but this does not mean that they do not exist. People who
used to see sunflowers and dragonflies know that they will come out when the right time (the
summer) comes (Nhật Hạnh 2002, 94).

One is driven to ask, “Where are all the absent things?” Thích Nhật Hạnh answers that
all absent things are already there. They all exist as well as the present things that we are seeing
at this moment and at this place

They [sunflowers and dragonflies] have just been somewhere else during the
winter, in another manifestation, waiting until conditions are favorable in order to
manifest themselves again. To qualify them as non-existing in winter is a wrong
perception. (Nhật Hạnh 2002, 94)

Absent things are there but manifested in a different form.

Conversely, presence does not mean that something is not present and suddenly comes to
be present from nothing to be seen by someone at a certain place. Going and coming, Thích
Nhật Hạnh argues, cannot be applied to describe the reality since all things are there. Reality
does not come and go. It is always there. The best example to describe the nature of reality as
always there is the kaleidoscope and the possible forms and colors it offers (Nhật Hạnh 2002,
86). All possible forms and colors are already there in the kaleidoscope. Every time a child
turns the kaleidoscope, the turn leads to a change in the form and colors the kaleidoscope
presents to the child’s eyes. When new forms and sets of colors are present in front of the child’s
eyes, the old patterns and colors, although, not present at that moment are still there in the
kaleidoscope in different types of manifestation and possibilities waiting to manifest when
conditions are met. They are there but their form and colors are now hidden to the child’s eyes.
They are absent at this moment to the child’s eyes but they exist equally with the present pattern
and colors. That is, Thích Nhật Hạnh argues that both presence and absence exist
simultaneously. The view that one thing presents the whole is crucial to the Vietnamese view of
reality, that every being is a manifestation of reality. Both presence and absence are modes of manifestation. In this sense, reality is a flow of manifestations characterized by continuation rather than a succession of birth and death, coming and going. Let us reflect upon Thích Nhất Hạnh’s verse, “A Sheet of Paper:”

No coming, no going,
No after, no before.
I hold you close,
I release you to be free;
I am in you
And you are in me. (Nhật Hạnh 2002, 80)

Reality, then, has several features. Reality is a unity of mortality and immortality, of historical and ultimate dimensions. In the section on “The Historical and the Ultimate Dimensions”, Thích Nhất Hạnh writes, “We look upon reality in our daily lives through the historical dimension, but we can also look upon the same reality in the ultimate dimension. Reality can be manifested in the historical dimensions, or it can be manifested in the ultimate dimension (Nhật Hạnh 2002, 22).

A good example of reality as unity of the historical and the ultimate dimensions is the relation between waves and the water of the ocean. In terms of historical aspects, ocean water manifests itself through many waves that come and go, waves that can be small and large, peaceful and hostile. From the ultimate dimension, the nature of these waves is water. As water, it “is free from the birth and death of a wave. Water is free from high and low, more beautiful and less beautiful” (Nhật Hạnh 2002, 23). Reality is therefore inescapably temporal; if we want to speak of an ultimate reality, we must understand that reality as expressing itself in history.

How can we understand the structures of Being as a unity of absence and presence, of historical and ultimate or absolute? We must say that reality is a flow of manifestations, which we understand by careful reflection and contemplation of the changing nature of reality as it
appears to us. We can see this in our observation of things in everyday life. Thích Nhất Hạnh’s discussion of everyday life in his book, *No Death, No Fear*, draws our attention to ways in which imagination and memory – “looking deeply” – help us to apprehend things in their absence, their presence, and their fullness. Consider again his discussion of sunflowers in April:

If you come to France in April, you will not see any sunflowers. But in July the area around Plum Village has so many sunflowers. Where are the sunflowers in April? If you come to Plum Village in April and look deeply, you will see sunflowers. The farmers have ploughed the land and sown the seed, and the flowers are just waiting for one more condition to show themselves. They are waiting for the warmth of May and June. The sunflowers are there, but they have not fully manifested themselves (Nhật Hạnh 2002, 28).

Why can Thích Nhất Hạnh “see” sunflowers in April around his monastery at his Plum Village when the sunflowers are not present physically in front of his eyes? This simply is based on his past experience of seeing sunflowers blooming every previous summer at Plum Village. It also is based on his knowledge of gardening and gardeners’ work to plant sunflowers. His mind’s pictures of sunflowers at Plum Village during all the previous summers are still there in his mind. The knowledge of the gardeners’ work also is there in his mind. Both his imagination of sunflowers and knowledge of the sunflower planting process are with him while he is looking deeply at the Plum Village in April. All that is absent is brought into present for him in that Plum Village scene in April. His imagination of the past images of sunflowers associated with the Plum Village in the summer and his knowledge of the gardeners’ work are directed to the necessary result of the planting work in the future bring to his mind a scene of Plum Village in a hybrid form of the present, the past, and the future all at once. Intellection, imagination, and memory as faculties of the mind cooperate harmoniously to produce his vision of the whole.

Thích Nhất Hạnh’s “looking deeply” actually has a connotation of Zen meditation. In its very nature, Zen meditation is a process in which a meditator temporarily brackets his or her
thoughts, feelings, and sensations to focus on only one object. The object can be a material object, one’s bodily part or a point, an image, or a thought. By directing one’s consciousness (either thinking or perceiving) to a target, one is able to reduce other wandering thoughts, feelings, and distractions. In this sense, the mind is calmer than when it is directed to too many objects at the same time. The aim of the attention to the object is to get to the point that one’s consciousness is absorbed into the object from which a stream of thought flows. The object to which one directs all focus now turns to be a continuation of manifestations. That is why one is able to “see” reality as it really is in the sense that one not only is able to see the object at the present time in one form of manifestation but also is able to see possible forms of its manifestations in the past and future in two modes of presence and absence at once. Reality is approached in its multiple dimensions from the flow of thoughts, associations, memory, sensation, imaginations, etc. That is, reality is seen from its fullness by releasing one moment to the whole movement, one form of existence to the dialectical existence through meditation understood as such.

“Looking deeply,” according to Thích Nhất Hạnh, is a skill that needs to be trained just as a philosopher has to read, think, and write every day to build his or her background. The best way to exercise one’s “looking deeply” skill is to live mindfully. If one engages in philosophy, one does it with total mindfulness. In order to fill the present with the entire absent, one is expected to have rich lived experiences and knowledge, which is best gained from experience. Thích Nhất Hạnh reminds us about the priority of direct experience over indirect knowledge:

We can use an example that is easy to understand, of a tangerine or a durian fruit. If there is a person who has never eaten a tangerine or a durian fruit, however many images or metaphors you give him, you cannot describe to him the reality of those fruits… The reality of the tangerine goes beyond ideas. Nirvana is the same; it is the reality that goes beyond ideas. It is because we have ideas about nirvana that we suffer. Direct experience is the only way. (Nhật Hạnh 2002, 16)
Several crucial points about temporality should be kept in mind here. First, human understanding of existence should return to existence itself. Second, conceptual reflection is built from lived experience (e.g., direct perceptions, sensations.) In comparison with conceptual reflection, direct experience is more primary. Third, both conceptual reflection and direct perception eventually should be united and returned to existence itself. Existence is richer than both conceptual and perceptual knowledge (i.e., the reality goes beyond ideas).

Theory of impermanence. Now let us look at the theory of impermanence. Impermanence means that everything changes and that nothing remains the same in consecutive moments (Nhất Hạnh 2002, 40). The Buddhist theory of impermanence is an effort to capture the nature of reality. Impermanence is also a conception that enables us to transform, heal, and emancipate ourselves from being enslaved by any attachment to anything falsely believed as permanent (Nhất Hạnh 2002, 40). Impermanence implies several significant things.

First, there is a sense is which the theory is self-limiting: if reality is changing every moment, any theoretical, conceptual description of reality is a half-truth or even ultimately not valid as a description of reality at all. Any attempt to describe a past moment, cannot be accurately applied to an item in the present moment because that item is not the same in the present moment as it was in the past: “The insight of impermanence helps us to go beyond all concepts. It helps us to go beyond same and different, and coming and going. It helps us to see that the river is not the same river but is also not different either” (Nhất Hạnh 2002, 40-41). The theory of impermanence therefore cautions us not to absolutize or construe one or several theories or points of views as a completely adequate account of existence itself.

With that caveat, we can note a second implication of the theory of impermanence: to the extent that we can try to characterize reality, impermanence helps us to understand why reality
is, at its root, continuity. Because everything is changing every moment, existence must be seen
as a continuous flow. Third, the theory of impermanence also helps to explain the concept of
self as a non-substantial self: the self, like everything else, exists in a state of impermanent.
Fourth, impermanence adds a dimension to our understanding of the self as inter-self. Just as the
Olympic first is a constantly changing thing passed from one athlete to the next, so the self is
constituted in a constantly changing network of relations to other.

Theory of cause and effect. Reality is understood as a unity of temporality and spatiality
based on the Buddhist view that “everything is always there.” This principle is explained by the
Buddhist theory of cause, effect, conditioned arising, and sufficient conditions. Buddhist ideas
of cause and effect mean that one being is always an effect of many different causes. In turn, in
the flow of impermanence, this being is also a cause of manifestations of many other beings. A
being, therefore, is both cause and effect at the same time in different relations, which is to say
that a self is manifested in its relations with other beings.

Thích Nhất Hạnh reminds us that we should not simplify that one being is manifested by
only one cause. Rather, we should practice to look deeply into the system of causes and effects
to realize the complication of interactions among causes and effects. A carpenter is not the only
cause of the table. If the carpenter does not have things like nails, saw, wood, time and space,
food to eat, a father and mother who brought the carpenter to life, the carpenter would not be
able to bring the table into being. The causes of a thing are actually infinite (Nhật Hạnh 2002,
34). Causes can also be effects. The gardener is one of the causes that have helped to manifest
the flower, but the gardener is also an effect of causes: ancestors, father, mother, teacher, job,
society, food, medicine, and shelter. There cannot be something that we can call “pure cause”
(Nhật Hạnh 2002, 35).
Conditioned arising. Conditioned arising means “This is, because that is.” In this sense, one being is always there in the form of its enabling conditions. This being does not come and go, it always manifests itself either in the form of presence or absence. Consider Thích Nhất Hạnh’s example of matches, the fire, and oxygen.

The fire caused by the matches is always there even in its absent form of manifestation. It is all its causes and conditions. It is not in or outside Reality. Look deeply at a box of matches. Do you see a flame in it? If you do, you are already enlightened. When we look deeply at a box of matches, we see that the flame is there. It needs only the movement of someone’s fingers to manifest itself. We say: “Dear flame, I know you are there. Now I shall help you express yourself.” The flame has always been in the box of matches and also in the air. If there were no oxygen, the flame could not express itself. If you lit a candle and then covered the flame with something, the flame would go out for lack of oxygen. The survival of the flame depends on oxygen. We cannot say that the flame is inside the box of matches or that the flame is outside the box of matches. The flame is everywhere in space, time, and consciousness. If we blow on the flame we shall help the flame stop showing itself. Our breath, where we blow on the flame, is a condition that stops the manifestation of the flame in its flame form (Nhật Hạnh 2002, 28-29).

Sufficient conditions. Sufficient conditions mean that one being manifests itself in a specific form when certain sets of specific causes and conditions are met. “When we look deeply, we see that when all the conditions are sufficient something will manifest. What manifests does not come from anywhere. And when a manifestation ceases, it does not go anywhere” (Nhật Hạnh 2002, 31-31). When one or several causes and conditions change, that specific being changes its form of manifestation to another form. Among the conditions for the manifestation of the non-substantial self are continuity of existence as a constant flow and the constitution of the being as inter-being.
The Vietnamese Buddhist Conception of the Self

We have shown so far some of the ways in which Vietnamese Buddhism reflects the existential notion that a reflection upon reality or Being discloses the structure of Being. We have learned from Thích Nhất Hạnh that reality or existence is non-substantial because it is constituted by constantly changing entities, relations, and conditions. Reality is seen from both temporary and spatial points of view, and from both present and absent aspects at the same time. Its manifestations are always there without a final cause or a God. Human beings take their place as manifestations of reality or Being. In this section we shall look more closely at the Vietnamese Buddhist conception of the human being. By analyzing Thích Nhất Hạnh's view on the human self, I argue that Vietnamese Buddhism is a mode of existential philosophy insofar as it regards individuals as strong agents who are constantly constituted by and constituting the Other through actions, language, and thoughts. As a result, individuals are seen to be responsible for both themselves and others.

Theory of no self. In pre-reflective thought, Thích Nhất Hạnh claims, the self is understood as a fixed, permanent and separate entity, clearly delineable from other selves and from other things in the world. Such a view is misleading, Thích Nhất Hạnh argues. To demonstrate the limitations of the pre-reflective view, Thích Nhất Hạnh offers of analogy of someone waving a torch in such a way to inscribe a circle. From one point of view, one could say that the circle is composed of a dense series of discrete moments of fire; from another point of view one could say that what there is, is a circle of fire. Thích Nhất Hạnh's point is that neither description is sufficient. What we want to say, rather, is that the circle is constituted by the multiple moments in their transformation into what we see as a circle. It is the
transformation and continuity of the various moments that constitute the circle (Nhất Hạnh 2002, 75). Rather than thinking of the self as a permanent, separate and substantial thing Thích Nhất Hạnh’s offers the notion of the self as a non-substantial, “inter-being.”

This notion of the self as an “inter-being” implies many things. First, we may speak of the “nothingness” or the “emptiness” of the self. By this we do not mean that there is no such thing as a self but rather that the self is constituted in relation to everything else – most especially in relation to other beings but also the entire network of reality at all levels including the social, the cultural, the natural, and the cosmic domains (Nhất Hạnh 2002, 49-51). The self is not a separate entity, atomistically distinguishable from other selves. Nor is the self to be seen as transcendental self\(^{31}\) persisting through time or even after death. Further, on Thích Nhất Hạnh’s view, though the self is intimately related to biological, material, and cultural factors, it is not determined by them.\(^{32}\) We may summarize this view of the self by saying that, on the Vietnamese Buddhist view described by Thích Nhất Hạnh, the self is a relational self, mutually constituted with other human beings and rest of reality.\(^{33}\)

It is important to understand how central this idea is to Vietnamese thought. The idea applies to the Vietnamese’s everyday behaviors at different levels, manifesting itself in people’s beliefs, cultural festivals, forms of arts, and philosophy. Ancestor worship, for example, is practiced by every Vietnamese family regardless of their different religions. Every family has its own altar, which is located in the center of the main room of a traditional three-room house [nhà ba gian]. When a member of the family passes away, the family offers three real meals a day on the altar during the first 49 days or 100 days after the death, depending on the variations of customs from province to province. During this time, it is believed that the dead’s soul is still there and that the dead still needs to eat to sustain itself. The custom of offering real meals
everyday stops after that period but the idea never goes away. Every year on the day the dead passed away, the family offers the dead a big meal. The Vietnamese calls it “ngày dỗ” [death-day.] Family members visit their parents’ home to remember the dead.

The ritual tells us several things. First, it expresses the family members’ gratitude to the dead, a practice based on the view of being as inter-being. The family members' present status depends on the constitution of the dead. Second, it is an occasion when family members gather to strengthen their family community. Third, and most importantly, to the Vietnamese the dead are still there. That is why a real meal is offered on the family’s altar every year. The Vietnamese know that the dead do not actually eat the meal. However, in the Vietnamese view the dead are still there in the world in different forms of manifestation and can come back to join the meal and be with the family members. Some people believe that on the death day, when the real meal is offered, the dead manifest in different forms (e.g., a butterfly, a bird, or some signs.). In this sense, the Vietnamese believe that both the living and the dead live in the same reality. The past is always with the present. The Being of all beings never comes and goes. Furthermore, a being is its causes, conditions, and its relations manifested and changed constantly according to different combinations of these factors just like the different patterns and colors that a kaleidoscope shows when turned in different configurations. In this sense, all beings are always there in the world at once. What is striking is that this belief does not change based on one’s education, social class, religion or gender. It remains the same regardless whether one holds a doctoral degree or a high school certificate, whether one is rich or poor, whether one is lucky or suffers bad fate, or whether one is Buddhist, Christian, or atheist.

A living tradition of inter-beings is clearly expressed in the dynamics of Vietnamese family life. Consider the following saying:
\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Sinh con rời mới sinh cha} \\
\text{Sinh cháu rời mới sinh ông}
\end{align*}
\]

[A baby is born, a father is born]
[A grandbaby is born, a grandfather is born]

This saying echoes a precept frequently taught to children, “làm việc tốt để phúc đức cho con cháu” [One should always try to do good things for the sake of one’s children and grandchildren]. A family member, when deciding to do a certain thing, always considers whether what one is about to do will bring bad consequences for oneself and for all the members of the family. One takes responsibility if one’s actions bring bad fortune to the family. If one is successful in life, one thinks of it, not only as a result of one’s own actions but also as a result of what one’s family members, including one’s ancestors, have thought and done. The phrase, “vinh qui bái tổ” [Return home with glory]. For example, one achieves a doctoral degree and holds a higher social position in society in order to honor and express gratitude to one's family, and thus one prepares a visit to one’s hometown with offerings to one's family and ancestors.

The idea of inter-being also extends beyond the family. On Teacher’s Day, for example, Vietnamese students take time to visit their former and present teachers and professors who have influenced their lives and their ways of thinking. If one lives far from their teachers, one still spends time thinking about them with gratitude. This is an acknowledgment of the idea that one’s academic success is constituted in part by the contributions of others. The Vietnamese have a saying, “công cha, nghĩa mẹ, on thầy” – one’s flourishing as a full and complete human being is based on the father’s teachings, the mother’s giving birth and nurturing, and the teacher’s mentoring.

The view of inter-being extends to the natural environment as well. The Water Buffalo Killing Festival (Lễ hội đâm trâu) expresses the farmer’s gratitude to the gods of nature who
provide good weather for a good crop. In the festival the villagers slaughter best water buffalo as an offering to the gods. The festival simultaneously provides an opportunity for farmers to gather, share food, and have fun and to mark, in a public and social way, the interconnection of individuals, the community, and the natural environment. The dialectic of the human self and the environment is also evident in how often human beings destroy the environment to the extent that they seek to possess rather than to care for it. This tendency toward dominating nature has its negative effects in the increase of hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, droughts, unpredictable temperature changes, and diseases (e.g., cancers, allergies, birth defect, miscarriages) caused by the polluted environment. In this sense, each act one conducts changes the Other and the whole environment at different levels and *vice versa*. It is said that a butterfly’s wings flapping on one side of the planet can affect the weather on the other side (Nhật Hạnh 2002, 41).

Vietnamese society also reflects the interconnection between individual selves, social groups, and the overall structure of things in terms of the common theme of ontological conceptual pairing: as yin and yang, low and high, hard and soft. Vietnamese think of these kinds of parings in various contexts: king-citizen, father-children, sister-brother, husband-wife, friend-friend, professor-student, family-society [gia đình-xã hội], village-nation [làng-nước], and the like. Vietnamese morality offers sets of rules that guide people to behave in accordance with such paired relationships. In this sense, moral rules reflect the self’s inter-being. Indeed, literature, history, and philosophy [truyện thông văn-sư-tríết bất phân] are thought to exist harmoniously, as can be seen in Nguyen Du’s famous book, *The Tale of Kieu*, which is taken to heart nearly universally by Vietnamese people.

On Thích Nhất Hạnh’s view, the self as inter-being has a distinct temporal dimension: it exists in the flow of existence, constituting itself in present moments that reflect the past and
move toward the future. The human self includes emotional and cognitive aspects (Nhật Hạnh 1966), which themselves reflect the features of existence discussed in the previous section. Human love, for example, cannot be understood without reference to the act of loving and to the person, idea or thing which is loved. But our emotions are also ever changing and, in this sense, impermanent (Nhật Hạnh 2002, 46-47).

In speaking of the Vietnamese Buddhist conception of the self, I have so far concentrated on matters pertaining to the mind, the intellect, and emotions. To round out my account I would like to mention briefly that Vietnamese Buddhists have also discussed the self in connection with various aspects of bodily existence (Nhật Hạnh 1966). Especially in ancient Indian Buddhist texts that have come to influence Vietnamese Buddhist thought several positions have been taken with respect to the body. The self is acknowledged to be constituted in part by rupa [material shape or form, Vietnamese = thừ] (Nguyễn 1958, 56; Harvey 1990, 49), which is the material aspect of existence.

The Theory of Karma and Individual Freedom and Responsibility

In his sophisticated interpretation of Buddhism, Nguyen Van Trung argues that the Buddhist man is an agent, who is the creator and the source of his own status because he is free to choose in a world in which there is no God the Creator. It seems to me that Nguyen Van Trung reads Buddhism through Sartrean existential lens manifested in *Existentialism as a Humanism*. While Sartre was able to explain how the freedom to choose oneself is possible by his systematic theory of consciousness as nothingness in *The Transcendence of The Ego* and *Being and Nothingness*, Nguyen Van Trung’s interpretation of Buddhism does not offer
ontological and epistemological foundations for such a freedom: he does not explain what makes freedom of choice possible. In this section, I attempt to explain what is left out by Nguyen Van Trung—what makes a Buddhist free to choose his motives of actions. By coordinating the Buddhist theory of Karma with Thích Nhất Hạnh’s ontological view of the human self as inter-being and a new interpretation of Buddhist conception of “no-mind,” I shall argue that Buddhism offers both an ontological and an epistemological foundation for the possibility of human freedom of action. In particular, I will argue that Vietnamese Buddhism during the period of the Vietnam War developed and emphasized a special form of understanding Karma with a focus on the present life rather than the next lives as is generally held by other branches of Buddhism. In showing this, I will argue that Vietnamese Buddhism of the period was in fact a mode of existential philosophy insofar as it embraced a concept of a strong human being as an agent who is free to choose to act and that it provided for an ethics of responsibility.

Karma is a Buddhist principle holding that beings are reborn according to the nature and quality of their past actions. The Buddhist theory of Karma emphasizes an individual’s own actions as the main component of his or her present status. Who one is is defined by what one does, thinks, feels, and speaks. We read in Majjhima Nikaya [Middle Length Sayings] that human beings are “heir” to their actions (Majjhima Nikaya 1954-1959, 203). The law of karma is seen as a natural law inherent in the nature of things, like the law of physics. It is not operated by a God, and indeed the gods are themselves under its sway. Good or bad rebirths are not, therefore, seen as “rewards” and “punishments”, but simply the natural results of certain kinds of action. Karma is often likened to a seed, and the two words for karmic result, vipaka and phala, respectively mean “ripening” and “fruit”. An action is thus like a seed which will sooner or
later, as a part of a natural maturation process, results in certain fruits accruing to the doer of the action. 

What determines the nature of a karmic “seed” is the will or intention behind an act: “It is will (cetana), Oh monks, that I call karma; having willed, one acts through body, speech or mind” (Anguttara Nikaya (Th.) the Book of Gradual Sayings 1932-1936, 415). Actions are motivated by intention which includes thoughts and emotions. All are considered motivations that lead to actions. Actions are judged as good and bad insofar as they are conducive to harm to oneself and others (Majjhima Nikaya 1954-1959, 415-16) (vol. 1), especially with respect to destructive effects that may affect the path to Nirvana (Majjhima Nikaya 1954-1959, 115) (vol. 1). The criterion for good and bad actions is also based on their motives. Motives for bad actions are greed, hatred and delusion. Conversely, the motives for good action include generosity, tolerance, friendliness, loving kindness, and clarity of mind.

So actions are motivated by intentions, thoughts, and emotion but the Buddhist view is not a deterministic view. Events are mutually conditioned by indeterminate causes and conditions. Precisely because beings are impermanent and there is no substantial self, freedom is possible. As Thích Nhất Hạnh puts:

By looking into the nature of things, we can see that nothing remains the same for even two consecutive moments. Because nothing remains unchanged from moment to moment, it therefore has no fixed identity or permanent self. So in the teaching of impermanence we always see the lack of an unchanging self. We call this ‘no self.’ It is because things are always transforming and have no self that freedom is possible. [Italic added] (Nhật Hạnh 2002, 39)

During the Vietnam War, the Vietnamese Buddhist notion of karma took a particular turn, emphasizing the present life rather than next lives. It focused more on how to change the present suffering world in practice. Engaged Buddhism as a force for social change was most influenced by Thích Nhất Hạnh but not exclusively. Thich Duc Nhuan and Thich Minh Chau
also emphasized the role of Buddhism in social change. Thich Minh Chau, in a speech entitled “Buddha and Social Change” delivered at Van Hanh University on the Buddha’s 2515 anniversary on the 9th of May, 1971 showed how Buddhism is interested in social and political issues and how it was able to change the society (Minh Chau 1990, 19-32). He asked young Vietnamese students to study Buddhism and apply it into practice to change the tragic situation of Vietnam:

We have to realize that: no one can change our situation and save us but ourselves. Only the Vietnamese can save Vietnam from the War and the contemporary social downfall. When each individual changes himself, he, then, automatically changes his family, university, society, and his nation. There are good individuals, there is a good society. In fact, there is no separation between individual and society. This is our educational and social message to you on the Buddha’s birthday (Minh Chau 1990, 31).

Thich Minh Chau’s speech raises the question of how, exactly, Buddhism can be a force for liberation. In Buddhism in general there are two means to liberation, direct moral action and meditation. Among the Vietnamese laypeople, the focus on practical actions for social change was particularly preferable to meditation. There was, as we have seen, already a core Buddhist belief in the importance of right action in the context of karmic rewards. This disposition received particular and poignant emphasis from the depredations of the war. As Thích Nhất Hạnh observes,

In everyday pagoda in Vietnamese, especially in the countryside, lay people find time to help with whatever work needs to be done. They believe that work done for the pagoda will bear good fruits—material and spiritual—for themselves and their children. The pagoda belongs to all the people; thus anything that benefits the pagoda spiritually benefits the people… Their practice is expressed through good acts rather than meditation [Italic added] (Nhật Hạnh 1998, 196).

Vietnamese people participated in the common work of pagodas, their town, and the country in the context of their present dehumanized circumstances. In his diary of the years 1962-1966 later published in English by Parallax Press under the title Fragrant Palm Leaves,
Thích Nhất Hạnh tells the story of a young Vietnamese person reflecting on why Vietnamese Buddhism was so engaged to the praxis of the country and why young people like him saw actions as the center and the source for creating a world anew.

Engaged Buddhism in Vietnam teaches that good works do not need to be reserved for the pagoda, but can be extended to our towns and villages. Thu explained to Mr. Bay, “People are suffering so much that even the Buddha does not just sit in the temple anymore!” ... It does not make sense for students of the Buddha to isolate themselves inside a temple, or they are not his true students. Buddhas are to be found in places of suffering. Thu said it perfectly... Young people like Thu are leading the way into new streams of Buddhist thought and action. They are giving birth to engaged Buddhism.” (Nhất Hạnh 1998, 196-197)

Responsibility. The theory of the reality and being as inter-being enable individuals to see other human beings as oneself and to see others’ situation as one’s own. In this way Buddhism also extends empathy to other beings which helps to ground an ethics of responsibility. One is responsible for one’s own status as well as one’s community’s status because through one’s own act, thought, and language, one creates oneself and one’s environment. The environment, in turn, shapes one’s as well as others’ status. This empathic sensibility extends even to people who are the perpetrators of evil deeds. In the words of Thích Nhất Hạnh,

In touching the earth, we touch the great beings, and we also touch all the suffering beings. We must be in touch with both. We must remember that there are beings caught in the deepest kind of suffering, like war, oppression and injustice. They have no way to speak about the suffering and injustice that they have to bear. There are pirates who are raping young girls. There are rich merchants selling arms to poor nations where children do not have food to eat or schools to attend. There are factory owners who use children as their workforce. There are people who are dying in prisons and re-education camps. In leprosy camps there are children and adults without limbs, illiterate and without hope. These hell realms need bodhisattvas. (Nhật Hạnh “Becoming the Pirate” and “Guiding Ourselves” 157-164).

How we live our life affects everything. So we must think, how have we lived our life so that young man in Thailand has been able to become a rapist? We have only looked to our own material needs. The family into which the young man was
born has been stuck in miserable poverty for many generations. His father was a fisherman who only knew one way to forget his troubles and that was by drinking. He did not know how to bring up his sons, and he beat them often. His mother did not know how to provide education for her children. At thirteen years old he had to accompany his father on the boat and learn to be a fisherman. When his father died he continued in his father’s place. He had no resources of understanding and love. He was tempted to become a pirate because in just one day a pirate can have real gold, which could lift him out of his miserable state that he feared, would go on forever. On the ocean there was no police force, so why not follow the example of the other pirates and rape the young girls on the boat they plundered?

If we had a gun we could shoot that young man, and he would die, but would it not have been better to help him to understand and to love? Where were the politicians, the statesmen and the educators to help him?

Last night on the shore of Thailand hundreds of babies were born to fishing families. If those children are not properly cared for, brought up and educated, some of them will become pirates. Whose fault is that? It is our fault: statesmen, politicians, the electorate who puts them in power and the educators. We cannot blame only that young man. If I had been born a poor child who was never educated, who had a mother and a father who were illiterate, who had been poor all their lives and did not know how to bring me up, I could have become a pirate. If you were to shoot me dead, would it solve anything? Who is that pirate? He could be me, and the child he raped could also be me. (Nhật Hạnh 2002, 157-159)

This is a profound observation. The implication of the Buddhist ethic of responsibility is that, if the relation between the self and the Other is understood as such, to understand the self, it is necessary to understand the social structure in which the self lives. Let us therefore look more closely at the Vietnamese Buddhist diagnosis of South Vietnamese society during the period 1954-1975.
The Vietnamese Buddhist Account of the Vietnamese Social Structure in Crisis

Most Vietnamese Buddhist and non-Buddhist intellectuals saw the period 1954-1975 as a time of crisis. They addressed different aspects of the crisis, however. I shall review several of the positions that were taken.

Thích Minh Chau characterizes the crisis as the slavery of the individual by science, religion, philosophical and ideological theories, social constitutions, and different forms of interests. He understood the crisis as the absolutizing of one aspect of reality as reality itself. I shall call that characterization of the crisis epistemic inauthenticity in the sense that it takes refuge in one or several moments rather than attempting to view things from the standpoint of movement or multiple perspectives.

Thích Minh Châu claims that both Western and Oriental cultures were facing the crisis. In *Encounter With Human's Slavery*, Minh Chau's writes:

Science, on the one hand, is useful to human beings because it benefits individual and social groups. On the other hand, it over-focuses on the objects' functions. As a result, it forgets the meaning of being a human. While science searches for the truth, it forgets the truth… Science fails to illuminate the totality of reality. It only can enlighten one-sided reality… Science separates the unity between man and nature. Being enslaved by science, man lost the unity between individual and society, man and nature. Man lives in a paradox between the tense relation between the individual and the community, oneself and the other. The paradox is caused by the separation between subject and object. The subject is enslaved by the object, which leads to the fact that the individual is enslaved by social institutions. Or the object is enslaved by the subject. As a result, the object turns to be a means for concrete human subject's selfish, ambitious, and hateful aims. That is, man is separated from its authenticity. Calculated science and social constitutions turn man into the slave of symbols, ideologies, ideals, and negative values (Thích Minh Châu 1969, 1970, 19-20).

In his article "Tim Prajnapati cho thời đại" [Search for Prajnapati for the Present Time] published by the journal *Bách Khoa* in 1964, Thích Nhất Hạnh also characterizes the time as
crisis from a Buddhist point of view. He invokes the idea of *prajnapaṭi*, a Buddhist term meaning a means or a method to approach the Truth. In Buddhist symbolic language, *prajnapaṭi* is the figure pointing to the moon. The Truth or existence is the moon. Thích Nhất Hạnh distinguishes ideologies and philosophies from "Chân lý" [Truth]. Ideologies and philosophies are descriptions of the Truth but not the Truth itself. Rather, they are means to approximate the Truth. Thích Nhất Hạnh describes the crisis as the result of a one-sided approach to truth, approach he also calls a disease ["chủng bệnh"] (Nhật Hạnh 1964, 75). The cause of the disease is that particular ideologies and philosophies that reflect only certain aspects of existence contextualized by specific time and place are being mistaken for the truth (Nhật Hạnh 1964, 80-81). He rejects the attempt to absolutize one or several human understandings of existence as existence itself.

A practical and devastating consequence of this philosophical mistake is that the absolutizing of particular views leads to a denial of other different points of view which in turn contributes to the kinds of conflicts that lead to war and suffering. Each side wishes to impose its view over the other. No one steps back to see the whole picture, to negotiate and to recognize the validity of the other's view. Wars occur when the Other's view is different from the Self's view and the Other wants to overturn the Self's view by making one's view the Self of the Self. Thích Nhất Hạnh writes, "The clash among ideologies and extreme faiths is the most serious cause of the broken and suffering world in our century" (Nhật Hạnh 1964, 75). One might call this situation a form of “epistemic closure.”³⁹ The Vietnam War is, in short, a clash of ideologies, between capitalism and socialism, between the US and the Soviet Union, and between North and South Vietnam.
Thich Duc Nhuan in his *Actualizing Buddhism in the Present Time* characterizes the period as a time of loss, impasse, despair, doubt, hopelessness, loneliness, meaninglessness, and suffering (Đức Nhản 1967, VII-IX). He argues that all philosophical movements end up against “the death wall” [bức tường chết]:

The birth of Realism and materialism in the 20th century failed to cope with the impasse. It established a “death wall” in reality. Man always faces imminent death. In the 20th century we find ourselves living in a dead and cold society. We live in constant anxiety and anguish. On the materialist view, truth is assumed to lie only in one’s present life while in the meantime human life hangs under the death regimes’ sword. Society is both nirvana and hell. God’s power is in the hands of men, who lack love, justice, and are full of hatred and unfairness. Such a tragedy. (Đức Nhản 1967, 12-13)

Thich Duc Nhuan sees the crisis as involving an inversion of means and end. Ideals, ideologies, religions, theories, and philosophies ought to be means to attain the truth, which is to say means of liberation. What has happened, however, is that human beings have become slaves to “objectified” ideals and ideologies that are taken as standards of truth. Human beings are being killed for the sake of these ideologies that govern individuals’ ways of thinking, acting, and being in the world.

Tue Sy, in his article "Từ biền-chúng hiện-sinh đến biền-chúng trung-quán" [From Existential Dialectic to the Buddhist Middle Way] published by the Journal *Văn Hạnh* in 1965 characterizes the time as “sa đoạt” [alienation] in its various forms. Here alienation is understood as a “human failure to confront dialectical contradiction” (Tue Sy 1965, 32). It also means a “falling” into a moment from the dialectical movement. The falling takes several forms: the falling of a person into the realm of material objects, the movement from a reaching out of being-in-itself to a state of taking refuge (for example in escapist poetry), the use of abstract philosophy to hide from the totality of existence, the incidence of art-for-art’s-sake that divorces art from life, and the prevalence of “idols” with draw from the everydayness of being. These are all
forms of alienation that are akin to Sartrean bad faith, the taking refuge in one pole between
being-in-itself and being-for-itself.

Thinh Minh Chau, Thích Nhất Hạnh, Thích Duc Nhuan, and Tue Sy characterize the
crisis in their own ways. What they share is the idea that the crisis is caused by the act of
absolutizing one moment or partial point of view and mistaking it for the totality. They all
suggest a search for a method that is able to transcend the obsession with moments or partial
points of view. But what is to be done in the face of the crisis? What is this new method to
liberate man from his slavery by one-sided and intolerant way of thinking? The answer, I
suggest, is found on writing of Vietnamese Buddhists on two aspects of Buddhist practice:
dialectical thinking and meditation.

Buddhist Dialectical Thought

It is said that Buddhist dialectical thinking is in the Vietnamese blood. Vietnamese see
the world and themselves dialectically. The dialectical strain in Vietnamese thought can be
traced to the long history of what is known as tetralemma logic in Buddhist thought. In
examining Buddhist dialectical thought we will see that, contrary to the views of Nguyen Van
Trung who ignores the topic entirely, the acknowledgment of the impermanence of the world is
far from an illusion or a mark of ignorance; it is rather an intellectual path to freedom, showing
the world as it really is.

Buddhist tetralemma logic is a method to grasp the "process ontology" of Buddhist
thinkers from as early as the Upanisadis onward. The logic was found in Buddhist scriptures
especially those of the Madhyamika school in the two works Mulamadhyamika-kārikā and the
Vigrahavyavartani written by the founder of the school of Nagarjuna (Vietnamese = Long Thọ Bồ Tát). It was used extensively in medieval Vietnam in Thiền Uyển Tập Anh. The Vietnamese Zen Master Cửu Chi, for example, used it to explain the relationship between being and nonbeing and to refute certain Confucian and Taoist metaphysical claims. The logic is used in the earliest Pali texts of the Theravada canon (the Tripitaka).

In its most basic form it is a way of thinking about the truth functions of propositions in the following array

1. X (affirmation)
2. Not-X (negation)
3. X and not-X (both)
4. Not X and not not-X (neither)

To the western mind that understands truth values in terms of two values – truth and falsity – the first two propositions pose no logical problems. We know what it means to affirm that something is the case (X). We also know what it means to deny that something is the case (not-X). What is more difficult to understand is what it might mean to assert that something both is the case and is not the case (both X and not-X) or that it is not the case that something is the case and that it is not the case (Not X and not not-X).

The sequence might, however, be deployed to make an ontological point about the flux of the world. For example, one might think about the following sequence:

A thing (a material thing, a self) is real (affirmation: a thing may be thought to exist)
A thing (a material thing, a self) is unreal (negation: a thing is constantly changing and in that sense may be thought to be unreal)
A thing (a material thing, a self) is both real and unreal (conjunction: from one point of view, a thing may be thought to exist, from a second point of view, a thing is constantly changing and in that sense may be thought to be unreal)

A thing (a material thing, a self) is neither real nor unreal (disjunction: from the standpoint of an enlightened consciousness the reality of things must be understood in the context of the relativity of the impermanence of the world and nature of the world as it really is)

Tetralemma logic can actually serve several functions in the Buddhist context. First, it can serve as a pedagogical device, as a way of shaking people out of their routine ways of thinking. In this sense the logic is a teaching device or a means guiding the Buddhist toward the ultimate goal of enlightenment. It may also have an epistemological role, illuminating the Buddhist precept that there are multiple standpoints from which one might try to gain truth.

From the point of view of its pedagogical functions, the logic is often called “the middle way.” The logic may also have an ontological function, helping to demonstrate the fundamental relativity of the world, what is often called Sunya. In the last case, it is important to realize that Sunya is not to be understood as ambara, which means "sky" or "empty space" (the lack of content), which was presented by an empty circle and leads to “nihilism,” as it is sometimes mistakenly translated, but rather zero, the void, nothingness, or emptiness of either positive or negative content, or qualification, indeterminate. The difference is crucial: the first translation takes us on the path to quietism, the second to enlightenment and an understanding of the true nature of reality.

In each of these functions, tetralemma logic and its use in Buddhist dialectical thought bring us to the realization that consciousness of reality – the path toward enlightenment – is a process, a constant movement toward approximating reality as it really is, something that
correlates with human beings’ standpoints and changing horizons. It further helps us to understand that the structure of thinking must embrace the multiplicity of human perspectives.

Meditation

Buddhism can be seen from different aspects: as a religion, as a philosophy, as a method of seeing the world and oneself as they really are without prejudices. In the latter sense, Buddhist enlightenment is achieved by meditation and the right usage of Buddhist tetralemma Logic. Buddhism's meditative goal is to achieve enlightenment, which means to see reality as it really is, which is what is meant by "suchness." In order to see reality as it really is, the observer must release oneself from fixed theoretical presuppositions and assumptions. By doing so, one will be able to let the thing show itself without the distortions that may be caused by presuppositions or assumptions. Absolute emptiness, which means complete freedom from theories and assumptions, is both a starting point – ridding the mind of assumptions and presuppositions – and an end point – understanding the void or the emptiness shown by mediation and tetralemma logic.

If Buddhist enlightenment is interpreted this way, there is a convergence between it and Western phenomenology as presuppositionless science, especially in the work of Husserl and Heidegger. In the "Introduction" of Cartesian Meditations, adopting Descartes’ spirit of overthrowing established scientific propositions to start philosophy with the absolute certainty of the cogito, Husserl starts his phenomenology by declaring that "If I have decided to live with this as my aim— the decision that alone can start me on the course of a philosophical development – I have thereby chosen to begin in absolute poverty, with an absolute lack of knowledge" (Husserl
In *Being and Time*, section 7, under the title "The Preliminary Conception of Phenomenology", Heidegger writes "Thus ‘phenomenology’ means *apophainesthai ta phainomena* - to let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself" (Heidegger 1962, 58).

Seeing the parallel, one should, however, keep in mind that Buddhism, while striving for the standpoint without any fixed standpoint, does not aim to establish a rigorous science as Husserl does but to release imprisonment of one or several points of views to the fluidity (the flow) of existence itself. That is, Buddhism aims to free people from the common and widespread belief in the existence of the self as a substance, which Buddhism diagnoses as the source of suffering. Like Descartes, Husserl hopes to build his phenomenology on a foundation that must be certain and evident, which is the transcendental subjectivity. That is the reason Husserl tries not to take for granted any established and available theoretical presupposition but to start with the direct experience of one's pure subjectivity. Phenomenology as a science is a progress in which it develops itself by describing this experience and extends its field from there.

There are various types of meditation. Sensuous meditation is a process in which the meditator observes and feels material objects and bodily movements. Thinking meditation is a process in which the meditator directs his or her mind to theoretical and challenging questions to search for fresh perspectives on experience. All types of meditation aim at attaining a state of mind where the mind, the body, and the thoughts are unified in one flow of pure experience or the “ordinary thoughts” without the interruption of constructing thought and affection. In this sense, the mind is said to be spontaneous and natural since it is freed from attachment to any thoughts, emotions, feelings, and body organs as the base.
It is difficult for us to imagine the unity of subject and object because the very moment the mind uses its set of concepts to “see” reality, there is already a gap between the subject who uses the concepts and the objects of knowledge. Buddhist meditation is the path to overcome the trap of the dichotomy of subject and object. All bases are released to the flow itself. The mind is released to the flow and identifies with the flow itself. By so intensively focusing on one thing as it object (a thing could be an object, a part of the body, a thought, a mental symbol, sign, or a mental or body movement such as a train of thoughts, breathing, and the movement of muscles etc.) the mind identifies with the object. Such a state of mind can be occasionally experienced by a teacher's performance for example. During those special moments, there is no separation among the mediator as a subject, the meditator’s thoughts as thought object, and the meditator’s self-consciousness of what he or she is doing at this time of mindfulness. Even the idea of mindfulness must be released to get to the flow of “ordinary experience” without any interruption of self-consciousness or constructing thought. In Zen Buddhism, this state is called transcendence having self-consciousness of something to “no-mind” or sunyata, a shift from I think I am responding to I am responding. This is a return from theory to practice, from thought to existence.

The objects of Koan meditation are challenging questions in Koan stories such as “Who is this that recites the name of the Buddha?” and “Who am I?” Among these questions, the meditator chooses one topic to contemplate. The meditator’s mind is directed to one of the most challenging questions one can imagine. By doing so, the meditator’s mind gradually gets calm because his or her constant flow of wondering thoughts directed to too many different objects is slowed down because of the mind’s being fixed on only one question.
The meditation process goes through different phases. During first state, one directs one’s mind to contemplate one question. By thinking and struggling with the question to find an answer, one moves to a second state where one faces sensation-doubt. The sense-certainty one’s mind has on the question suddenly seems not to be true anymore. In the Zen tradition, this is called the phase in which the meditator realizes that nothing is what it seems: “mountain is not a mountain and water is not water.” For example, the meditator can choose to contemplate the question, Who am I in my everydayness of being in the world? Most of the time, I believe that I am a unique being doing what is significant to me and to the society in accordance with my image of myself. The more one contemplates this question, the more one doubts one’s everyday beliefs. At a certain point, one reaches the point that the common belief about who one is is not true anymore as it seemed to be. The common belief is destroyed. Now, one still has not had the answer yet. The main point of Koan meditation is to encourage the meditator to come up with his or her own answer to the most important question, which can be called Insight. In Koan meditation, the process goes from calm meditation (focusing on one topic so the trains of wondering thought is slow downed) to Insight meditation.

The master can help when the meditator faces the abyss of nothingness – the sense that there is no established and ready answer to one’s question. One must constantly oneself to think of the question. The realization of insight on the topic at hand can be one or many thoughts at different level of clarity and profundity. The search for the question on one’s own leads to the freedom from attachment to established and biased set of theories, traditions, conventions, and the like. The next step is that from the freedom from established sets of answers, one thinks for oneself originally from the abyss of nothingness. One continues to direct one’s mind to one’s own original flow of thought. By transcending established theories, moralities, religions,
common beliefs, and sensations, a fresh and new stream of thought is born, just like the constant renewing stream of “virgin spring.” New meanings are born. In this way, Koan meditation parallels the existential idea of thought in which conventional understandings of the world are collapsed and new meanings arise. A new world is constantly produced by and through fresh and subtle observations of one’s own eyes.

The meditator then can describe what one has experienced during the process of meditation to one’s master. One may writes verses, articles, and books describing one’s experience. In this sense, Buddhist texts are reflections upon lived experiences of the meditator. Since meditation observations are the result of a process of purifying without the interruption of constructing thoughts and judgments and conventional views, these Buddhist texts are highly individual. At the same time, these texts are universal because they attempt to access and describe pure experience without interruption of personal thoughts and emotions. That is, the meditative descriptions are freed from common ways of seeing and thinking about the world, others, and oneself.

Death

Keeping the radical and open-ended potential of Vietnamese Buddhist notions of dialectical thinking and meditation in mind, I would like to conclude our review of existentialist themes with a brief consideration of a topic on which Vietnamese Buddhism has much to offer. I wish to talk about death and its significance.

The Vietnamese Buddhist Thích Nhất Hạnh offers a fresh understanding of death. We already discussed his view on the reality in the previous sections. His view on the Reality
already implicitly expresses his positive view on death. What is death? Since the self is neither completely and totally impermanent nor permanent, it must be something in between. Let us begin with an enigmatic passage written by Thích Nhất Hạnh:

If you light a candle and the flame keeps burning until the whole candle is finished, is the candle still there or not? The Buddha says there is no annihilation. We have seen that this is true. And also we have seen that the concept of permanence is not applicable to things as they are. So the truth lies somewhere in the between. Here, we must look deeply with all our concentration. (Nhật Hạnh 2002, 121)

If you learn to see yourself and look deeply at your everyday actions you will realize that they have a future dimension. Like a candle that diffuses light, the beauty and goodness of your actions shine friends, your children, and into the world. In this way, you continue into the future. You will not be annihilated. You will not be caught in the notion that you will not exist anymore when you die. The truth is that you are not permanent, but neither are you annihilated. (Nhật Hạnh 2002, 130)

Neither of the two extreme views of death – that there is no death and that death is a total and complete annihilation – corresponds to reality. On Thích Nhất Hạnh’s view, birth and death, death and remainder, only have their meanings in their pairing. In this sense we are between death and remainder at the same time. Birth and death both mean more than biological beginnings and ending. The only true death is ignorance caused by narrow and superficial views of reality that prevent one from living in the present moment, from seeing one’s self as an inter-being, and from realizing one’s freedom and the possibility of love and responsibility.

Conventional views of life and death reveals on a partial view of the fullness of human existence. Buddhist philosophy is a constant effort to overcome traditional views of human reality in order to awake humanity’s understanding of reality as inter-connected system. From the standpoint of Vietnamese Buddhism we come to understand that one never dies. Rather one transforms oneself from manifestation into another. It is here, perhaps, that our previous discussions of in our understanding of death that our previous discussions of presence, absence, the unsubstantial
self, our relationship to others, our freedom and our responsibility come together most forcefully, for this understanding of death is intimately related to the idea of social change. One’s death may be a force for transformation and for peace, a point that was brought home in stunning clarity by the self-immolations of Vietnamese Buddhists such as Thich Quang Duc who surrendered himself in public action in 1963 for peace and religious reconciliation that protested Diem’s suppression of religious freedom and helped to bring the regime to an end. ⁴⁶
CHAPTER 3
WHO AM I? LÝ CHÁNH TRUNG ON THE SELF AND THE OTHER

*If ethics without politics is empty, then politics without ethics is blind.*

—Simon Critchley

The question, "Who am I?" and the relation between the self and the Other are core philosophical concerns in the long history of Vietnamese philosophy, especially in the context of Vietnamese existential philosophy. In this chapter I wish to explore these questions through a more developed discussion of the thought of Lý Chánh Trung, which I only summarized in the first chapter.

Lý Chánh Trung is a humanist and an existential thinker presenting a philosophical view affected by the concrete context of French colonization. As humanist, his moral and political theories take human being as the central and the final goal. He understands the human being as a free subject, one who has the power to choose what he or she is, to do what he or she should do, and to develop the means to realize his or herself in the context of the social and political project. Social change, Lý Chánh Trung argues, is rooted in individual change, but his political morality is directed to humanity as a mutual recognition of self and the Other as free subjects. Lý Chánh Trung also promotes the idea of non-violent struggle as the preferred method of achieving social change and justice.

A difficulty in studying Lý Chánh Trung’s thought, especially on morality and politics, however, is that his writings are sometimes contradictory and unclear. For example, in his early writing (e.g., Lý 1960, 122), he characterizes the Self’s ideal self as the great Other. In his later
writings (Lý 1972, 138; Lý 1965, 30-56; Lý 1965, 26-30; Lý 1965, 23-40; Lý 1964, 18-24), he focuses on the poor in the constitution of the Self’s ideal self. This tension emerges from his view of morality and that of politics. I think, however, that they can be reconciled in his theory of revolution and his analysis of the Self-Other dialectic. I will build my case through a close attention to Lý Chánh Trung’s book, Cách mạng và Đạo đức [Revolution and Morality], which is an effort to bring morality to bear on the possibility of a non-communist revolution through the advancement of a place for humane ideas, justice, and equality in politics.

Morality as Self-Awareness and the Self-Realization of Humanity

The Self, according to Lý Chánh Trung, recognizes itself by directing itself toward the Other. Moral ideals and life-long vocation emerge in and through the act of attending to the Other, in which Self and Other are mutually recognized as human fellows. The Self is also a moral ideal that is realized through its understanding and effecting of moral ideals the consequence of which is the manifestation of one’s humanity. Dehumanizing practices on others result also in the degradation of the self. This is because of the premise of co-dependence of human relationships; the self needs the Other as human being to enable a judgment beyond the Self for self-worth. That the self is another’s Other further establishes this necessary relationship.

What, however, is morality? Lý Chánh Trung claims there are two types of morality: a closed and an open morality\(^4\) (Lý 1960, 9-14). A closed morality is a system of moral rules that guide human behaviors and actions to protect and sustain the present structure of society. Closed morality takes the present social structure as the highest goal of moral life and uses moral rules
as a means to force people to obey moral rules so that they maintain the status quo. By contrast, open morality involves an individual searching to achieve his or her human potential or humanity [Vietnamese: nhân tính; Chinese: ren] by and through connecting with and understanding the Other. Open morality takes human beings and humanity as its center.

Lý Chánh Trung favors open morality, which he argues requires finding the moral ideal for oneself through consciously understanding why one acts according to a moral principle. A guiding principle is the achievement of one’s “human nature” or one’s humanity. Although this formulation may suggest a major difference from other existentialists, who reject human nature, his actual usage is not one of an over-determined or law-governed identity but, instead, of an open potential shared by other human beings. In other words, this is not an appeal to a prior essence. This claim of striving to achieve one’s human potential or humanity raises the question of who is a human being or who is the self? Since there is no general or over-arching self and that the questioning always starts with my (every human being’s unique) questioning of my (his or her) self and my (his or her) moral life, then the question points to a difference that marks one’s unique relation to the problematic beyond all others. But why is the achievement of one’s human nature, potential, or humanity good? Lý Chánh Trung holds that it is good one is not born fully-achieved of one’s humanity, which is a developmental process. The goodness sought here points to maturation (Lý 1960, 12-14). This goodness goes beyond oneself, however, since Lý Chánh Trung also argues that it is good for the Other since the Other is also part of humanity and depends on the flourishing of that larger community; thus, failure of the Self affects others, and their failures affect the Self. Simone de Beauvoir holds a similar view:

We have to respect freedom only when it is intended for freedom, not when it strays, flees itself, and resigns itself. A freedom which is interested only in denying freedom must be denied. And it is not true that the recognition of the freedom of others limits my own freedom: to be free is not to have the power to
do anything you like; it is to be able to surpass the given toward an open future; the existence of others as a freedom defines my situation and is even the condition of my own freedom. (Beauvoir 1948 (1976), 90-91)

Why does one have to realize that the achievement of human nature or humanity is one’s need or moral ideal to realize? The reason, according to Lý Chánh Trung, is that one does not “naturally” become a real human being. He writes:

If the “fate” [that is determined by heaven] is something that necessarily happens, then, there is no place for morality. There is morality and there is a “way” [tao] to become a human being because a born human being does not necessarily become a true human being.
And if a human being does not become a true human being “naturally,” then, humanity [or human nature] should not be understood as a necessary law but as a definition that each human being has to seek [articulate] for oneself. The “heaven fate” is only material and spiritual conditions that are given to humankind and me by heaven [tạo hóa]. I have to seek a definition for myself based on such conditions.49 [Explanations is added] (Lý 1960, 14)

In the above quote, what Lý Chánh Trung calls “definition” should be understood as one’s project of one’s life in the sense that one finds for oneself who one wants to become so as one can realize the-who-one-wants-to-become based on one’s material and cultural conditions such as biological features, race, gender, country, family, social class etc. A human being is not, however, biologically determined; biology is, instead, a condition faced by every human being as a point of departure. A human being achieves her status as a free subject by and through struggle for recognition with the Other as a free subject. As a free subject, the individual chooses to become a human being or not, and since there is no already established and fixed definition of a human being, she must rely on practice and lived experience as her guides (Lý 1960, 14). This formulation is akin to Sartre’s slogan that “existence precedes essence.”

Free choices are not done irrationally, however. Lý Chánh Trung writes: “A human being is a human being if he or she still knows to attend to a moral ideal” (Lý 1960, 1-13), by which he means a principle of action.50 As he elaborates:
True freedom is to accept all internal and external data/events [the givens]. Acceptation does not mean to defeat and to obey these conditions as fate. However, this acceptation means to turn them into conditions from which I can make myself. In other words, true freedom is to turn “destiny” into destination, more exactly, into one’s vocation\(^{51}\) (Lý 1960, 24).

What Lý Chánh Trung calls “fate” and dữ kiện [French: données\(^{52}\); English: data/events] can be understood, in Sartrean language, as “facticity,” which includes one’s own body, race, culture, family, and nation in which one is born. “Fate” also means what Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, calls “Nature” and the cultural world into which a child is born: a world in which the child does not have any power in making it while the child, at the same time, has to live with and accept it. Later on, the former child will make her own self through the development of a project when she becomes an adult. This path leads to the transformation of the natural into a cultural one in which the adult materially objectifies her project though actions (cf. Beauvoir 1948 [1976] 35-40).

Lý Chánh Trung adds: “I am surrounded by the givens\(^{53}\) including internal [psychological], social and natural ones. Freedom does not mean to refuse the givens but is to conquer and liberate myself based on the givens”\(^{54}\) (Lý 1960, 24). In short, freedom is marked by one’s capacity to choose one’s own project, to commit oneself to this project so as to assert one’s project/moral ideal/ideal self into reality.

Lý Chánh Trung further argues that achieving one’s human potential, which we could here also call humanization, involves achieving one’s true human being [thành nhân]. In other words, the self becomes a true self [tôi là ai]. This true self is a non-substantial self in the sense that it is not a property. The self is also not its possessions (Lý 1960, 15-16).
Similar to other existentialists, Lý Chánh Trung claims that a person’s life can be understood as a sum of her actions in the past, which make up her present social position. However, she can always change her attitude toward her past actions. Moreover, her past actions do not necessarily determine her future (Lý 1960, 17). These arguments, familiar to most existentialists as “ekstasis,” where, through negotiating one’s relationship to the dimensions of past, present, and future, one forms a persona. Lý Chánh Trung writes:

But I transcend all these things: my persona is an inborn potentiality. I cannot refuse it but I can develop it or change it in accordance with what I want. Furthermore, persona is only a provisional structure in the vocation to develop or to block potentiality of temperament. (Lý 1960, 17)

Lý Chánh Trung’s also endorses the existential phenomenological view of the body as a condition instead of a determined thing in which the Self as substance resides. The body is primordial and primary because one cannot even exist without one’s body. Though one’s body is very special in comparison with what one has, especially with regard to other objects, the significance of the body is marked by its destruction in acts of suicide, i.e. killing the Self. Sometimes one says, however, “I have my body” [tôi có cơ thể tôi] but not “I have my I” [tôi có của tôi]. That is, I and my body are not identical and the I is not what I “have.”

Recourse could be made to making the self identical with consciousness, but, as with Sartre, Lý Chánh Trung answers that we are not identical with consciousness because consciousness is conscious of myself, for instance, with my body [ý thức về tôi định liên với thân xác tôi]. In addition, we sometimes say that we have consciousness. The I cannot be identical with what I have because I am more than that (Lý 1960, 19).

At this point, Lý Chánh Trung brings Sartre’s Being and Nothingness into consideration in support of open morality through its portrait of the self as transcending its past and present toward the future based on self-consciousness as nothingness or the lack.
emerges from the understanding of consciousness as intentional, by which is meant that consciousness is always consciousness of something. That something, being an object that is not identical with consciousness, reveals absence and knowledge in an act of consciousness. That consciousness cannot stand alone but must be in relation to an object indicates its lack. Lý Chánh Trung objects, however, to Sartre’s view of the human being as nothingness, which emphasizes the negative view of man ultimately as a “useless passion.” Lý Chánh Trung regards the gap between the present self and the ought-to-be-self as an opportunity for the self to complete itself. While Sartre sees man as consciousness as something other than itself, Lý Chánh Trung argues that the self is itself but in its incomplete form; that is, there is always room for the self to become itself in a hopeful way. He writes:

However, Sartre’s mistake is that he only sees the “emptiness” of the gap [between the for-it-self and the in-it-self]. In fact, instead of saying that man is being whose being is not being, it should be said that I have not become myself yet. Instead of saying that I am a lack, it should be said that I am a lacking existent. When I am conscious of my lacking existent, I also am conscious of such a lack as full of attente… I am a “réalité d’attente”—a waiting reality: I am not fully becoming myself yet and I have to become myself. My journey does not start with nothingness but with being: my existence is being as something for myself, but it has to be the self, as a result it [my existence] is directed toward the “devoir-être” [cái nhiệm thể]… (Lý 1960, 21-22)

Just as Beauvoir’s Ethics of Ambiguity resolved certain omissions concerning morality in Being and Nothingness (Oaklander 1996, 238, 336-339), so, too, Lý Chánh Trung’s view supplements critical insights of Sartre. While Sartre’s ontology in Being and Nothingness is not able to offer an ethics, as Thomas Anderson observes (Anderson 1993, 215), Beauvoir prepares for her ethics by considering the failure of Sartre’s formulation of the human project—the “useless passion”—as the starting point for morality. At the beginning of her Ethics of Ambiguity, Beauvoir summarized the common charge of existentialism to prepare for her existential ethics: “But it is also claim that existentialism is a philosophy of the absurd and of
despair. It encloses man in a sterile anguish, in an empty subjectivity. It is incapable of furnishing him with any principle for making choices. Let him do as he pleases. In any case, “the game is lost” (Beauvoir 1948 [1976], 10). The point of such a depressing view of man, however, makes room for an open and optimistic ethics as Beauvoir defends existentialism:

But it is also true that the most optimistic ethics have all begun by emphasizing the element of failure involved in the condition of man; without failure, no ethics; for a being who, from the very start, would be an exact co-incidence with himself, in a perfect plentitude, the notion of having-to-be would have no meaning. One does not offer an ethics for a God. (Beauvoir 1948 (1976)10)

Similarly, Lý Chánh Trung writes:

Perhaps, it is correct as Sartre thought that I will never be identical with that devoir-être: it is like the horizon that I cannot reach… Of course, not achieving the devoir-être is a failure; however, there is this failure because I am directed to such a being as the perfect. The failure does not manifest the absurd, meaninglessness, and hopelessness of human conditions, but manifests the limit of human being (man cannot be perfect). This is the condition of moral advancement. (Lý 1960, 22)

What Ly Chanh Chung calls “cái nhiệm thể” [French: devoir-être; English: must-be, but the meaning he has in mind is more like a waiting reality] is the self’s future possibilities. However, these possibilities are directed toward a specific direction: the good as the full blooming of humanity or my human nature that its nature is a mystery. To achieve such a being is one’s own duty, which the concept devoir-être already expresses itself. In this sense, the self is not only its part and its presence, but also its future.

Up to this point, we have learned that the self knows who it is only if it has its self-consciousness. Because the self has self-consciousness, it knows that it is a waiting reality. That is, it knows itself that it is not only its past, present but also its future possibilities. The past and the present make the present self—“cái hiện thể”. However, this present self always directs itself toward its future self—cái nhiệm thể—with possibilities. The past and the present do not
determine the future possibilities. There are at least two main directions as possibilities: the possibility to achieve the good as humanity and the possibility to dehumanize itself toward the evil. Lý Chánh Trung holds that a human being or a self does not necessarily become or directs itself to the good or the evil. This is the moment of individual’s freedom of choice of who the individual wants to become. This is also the field of morality. He writes:

If I am a perfect being, if I am completely identical with myself, then, I do not have to be anything else and therefore, I do not have to do anything. I am a freedom because I am not fully myself yet and have to choose who I am. I am a freedom but not that I have freedom as my “property” because who I am depends on my choice of myself. I am my choice of myself. (Lý 1960, 22-23)

Up to this point, Lý Chánh Trung is able to reply to the question who I am or who the self is by two claims: I am my self-consciousness and I am a freedom:

In conclusion, I myself am a consciousness and a freedom. I start to be my “self” when I am conscious of myself as an existent/a being toward mysterious being; that is, as a freedom to choose myself and make myself. (Lý 1960, 24)

This self faces the ideal self, however, as the project that organizes it as an expression of its freedom, which Lý Chánh Trung characterizes as “walking” toward a horizon:

Finding the ideal self, responding to the call of vocation is to risk oneself into an adventure while one does not know for sure one will be “successful”. The ideal self presents itself in front of my eyes as a horizon that invites me to follow. It only uncovers itself along each step I walk. (Lý 1960, 39)

Since the self in searching is not identical with the ideal Self, then the latter must relate to the former as an Other. Lý Chánh Trung’s moral philosophy now turns its center from the question the self to the question of the Other.

Who is the Other? I realize two types of Other by and through my relation with other human beings: a forceful Other and an appealing Other. The former is imposed upon me and the latter plays a role in the cultivation of my ideal self [cái tôi lý tưởng]. The older question now re-appears: how do I find my ideal and how do I know that I am self-consciousness of my ideal
The question is by being in social relations with the Other. The first and closest Other I have contact with is my mother, father, and my family members. This social relation in the form of family relations articulates my ideal self by and through rules that I have learned to follow and avoid through what my parents and my family members have “taught” me by rewards and punishments. Receiving rewards from the Other, I “know” that I have done good things or ought-to-do-things. Being punished by the Other, I “know” that I have done bad things or ought-not-do-things. Punishment is a social form to forbid from doing certain things that my parents and other family members consider bad or evil. The more I experience rewards and punishments, the more I come to articulate my ideal self in the form of the ought-to-do-things and the ought-not-do-things. In other words, my ideal self is constituted by and through social relations with the Other and formed from without—from an external social force—rather than from within. There is no room for the question to what I want and I appeal to. It does not matter to the Other whether or not the social ought-to-do-things are what I want or they would constitute the ideal self whom I want to become. I call this Other the forceful or dominating Other. Lý Chánh Trung writes: “It [social pressure] determines man’s project of his ideal self as if it is a burden fate” (Lý 1960, 32). Concrete forms of the forceful and dominating Other, Lý Chánh Trung claims, can be one’s mother, father and family members. However, it should be added more other forms such as friends, professors, lovers, husbands, wives, co-workers, leaders, bosses; social norms and social structures. Lý Chánh Trung holds that the form of self constituted by forceful and dominating Other is childish [trẻ con] and it needs to be overcome so that the self can grow or mature [trở về lơn] (Lý 1960, 31-32). Recognition of a room for individual self-determination and freedom is a necessary condition for this growth.
The appealing Other is the one that Lý Chánh Trung favors. That Other helps the self to articulate the ideal self in the form of an internal self-determined self without imposition and force. Lý Chánh Trung also sees this form of the ideal self as a mature phase in the development of human history in which the childish period is lower and must be overcome by the mature ideal self. What are the exemplars of this appealing Other? They are a sage, historical hero, contemporary admirer, a leader, and a friend, or God or a god if one is religious (Lý 196033).

This Other is a human being or great one to whom I look up, admire, and want to become:

I feel that this Other manifests all of my most profound and deepest wishes and desires. I feel as if I were in this Other and appealed myself. At the same time, it seems as if this Other presented in me long before and presented in me as something closer and more intimate with me than myself. I am sure that this Other is my authentic self.” (Lý 1960, 33)

The above quote says several important things about the great Other in relation to the self. First, the great Other is my ideal self that I want to become. Second, I want to become this great Other because this Other is so close to my human nature or humanity or individual tendency. That is, the great Other suits my human nature, my most positive and best possibility toward the good or humanity. Though I have many possibilities or tendencies to develop myself, this is the best tendency—the tendency appeals me most. Third, the meeting with this great Other is my opportunity to know who I really want to become. In other words, meeting the great Other, or cultivating a relationship with it if it is a religious symbol, helps me to articulate my ideal self. Lý Chánh Trung actually deploys the word “món quà” [gift] to describe the moment the self meets with the great Other (Lý 1960, 33). Fourth, the great Other as my ideal self appeals me—my present self—to transform myself toward a better self—toward humanity or the good. In this sense, the great Other helps me realize the possibility among many other possibilities—the possibility of the good or humanity that I shall attend to and struggle for.
There is, however, the problem of the influence of a bad Other, which the self may know that it does not want to become (Lý 1960, 36-37). Even that self has pedagogical value toward the cultivation of the better self since it is an Other from whom one learns. By acknowledging different forms of the Other, Lý Chánh Trung respects the diversity of human beings and human relations. This point is developed throughout his book *Revolution and Morality*, especially in the section on “Tinh thần đối thoại” [The Spirit of dialogue] through his claim that one has to seek for one’s own ideal self and realize it. One can go further to conceptualize one’s morality into a moral theory. However, one always has to keep in mind that one’s moral theory is a becoming, incomplete, and personal so that one should not impose one’s moral theory as the moral truth upon the others. Recognition should be respected by the Self and the Other.

I would like at this point to challenge Lý Chánh Trung’s view on the Other and the relation Self-Other on several points. First, social structures and social norms are not only forceful but also are forms of the Other, which was suggested by Heidegger (Heidegger 1962, 589) and Sandra Lee Bertky (Bertky, 119-134). Second, his view on the great Other as the ideal self leads to the recommendation of the self as an imitation of the Other. As a result, there is no difference between the self and the Other, which cancels mutual dialogue between the self and the Other because the mutual conversations are based on both the similarities and the differences between the self and the Other as he claims. He could respond to this challenge by arguing that the self is different from the great Other even when the great Other is the self’s ideal because the self has different methods to attain its goal—whereas the great Other is simply the ideal self.

Methods, he believes, define the particularity of the self and Other when the ideal manifests the universality shared between the self and the Other. However, his view that the great Other is the ideal Self still faces some difficulties. It presupposes that the great Other is perfect, which
makes that Other higher and more desirable than the present Self. In actual social relations, if this view is accepted by “lower” selves, it automatically creates a hierarchical social structure in which the lower selves fail to appreciate their diversity by trying to keep up with the great Other as the perfect standard while the former do not know for sure if they have capacities to become the great Other or they will be successful or not. More important, one may ask is it possible at all for the self to become and identify with the “great” Other? Lý Chánh Trung’s lived experience of being trapped by his desire to keep up and identify with the “perfect” French is an instance of the limitations of this view. This problem is also raises in another direction. When Lý Chánh Trung argues for identification with the struggles of the poor, to what extent is an ideal being formulated here that requires identification with those who are located at lower ends of the social hierarchy. How can Lý Chánh Trung relate his view on the Other and his idea of a social revolution of and for the poor if the poor is not the great Other? How, then, can an intellectual identify herself with the Other as the poor to lead the revolution of and for the poor as if it is for herself—the intellectual.65

One also can challenge how Lý Chánh Trung would respond if the Other is the Self’s enemy? Here “enemy” can be broadly construed. The enemy can be an ideal that is different or even opposite to mine. Is this Other still the Other according to Lý Chánh Trung’s view? However, in fact, I, as a self in the world with others, sometimes encounter this type of Other. Clearly, Lý Chánh Trung’s view cannot cover this case. In this case, the Other is not the ideal that I want to become. Rather, it is the ideal that I do not want to become. What should I do with this Other? How does this Other function as conditions of my understanding of my own self as well as the constitution of my own self? I can think of one possible answer: this opposite Other helps me to understand myself in the sense that this Other makes me realize that I do not
want to become this Other. That is, the Other, in this case, offers a negative constitution of my own self: there are other possibilities but at least I know for sure I do not want to become this possibility manifested in this Other. At this point, one may ask what I should do with this Other. This recognition is informed by the fact of actual conflicts among the Vietnamese and their parties, their social, professional, and political organizations. The Vietnamese were badly divided as Nguyen Van Trung, Lý Chánh Trung, and other members of the Hành trình group observe (Nguyen 1963, 290; Nguyen 1970, 206). Confronting this social phenomenon, Lý Chánh Trung and the Hành trình group appealed to the idea of dialogue, forgiveness, tolerance, trust, and mutual respect. Revolution and Morality as well as other articles published by Hành trình called for a new attitude—humility to listen and to understand the others (Nguyen 1970, 113-118, 133-140). Lý Chánh Trung and the Hành trình group thought of a common vocation, which was later manifested in their view on South Vietnam’s ideal self as a solution for the conflict and division. In this sense, the common vocation can unite differences. Though Lý Chánh Trung and Nguyen Van Trung do not discuss Buddhist absolute nothingness and Taoist Tao, anyone who is familiar with Buddhist and Taoist ontology would easily recognize the shared meaning between Lý Chánh Trung’s common vocation and the absolute nothingness and the Tao. Buddhist absolute nothingness and Taoist Tao can hold different selves simply because the standpoint of the Absolute Nothingness is the standpoint of movement, which is able to incorporate moments—the Oriental philosophy of harmonization.

Lý Chánh Trung’s discussion fails to acknowledge the diversity of meanings constantly constituted by each individual while she is attending or directing herself to the same or different great Other in different acts of consciousness. Since his analysis is premised upon a critique of the thought of Sartre, I would like to propose a phenomenological reconstruction of Lý Chánh
Trung’s structure of Self-Other relations. If the self recognizes the Other as a freedom, it fails to see itself except as also free. The relation is not one of imitation because the Other exceeds impositions, and the self exceeds the same, even as an Other. Through the act of attending to the Other, there is a new type of being constituted, which is the “vocation.” Here, vocation can be understood as a new meaning. In the new meaning, the self realizes (1) itself as a freedom to choose to act in accordance with the new meaning—the ideal self; and (2) the Self also realizes the Other as a freedom who has its own ideal self. The new meaning—vocation—unifies the self and the Other while neither it negates the self by the Other nor the Other by the self. Furthermore, it is able to save room for freedom of choice to follow the vocation for both sides if there is a partial or full shared meaning—vocation/ideal self.

Lý Chánh Trung offers his own response. However, I do not think that his response would work well in the long run. Lý Chánh Trung claims that the paradox of the self losing itself at the moment it sees the Other is not a real paradox:

In fact, there is no paradox, because the self that I am seeking is not the present self but the self I will [and have to] be. The mysterious self is something not that I have to seek and make by myself. To see the Other as a reflection of my self leads to the failure because I will never find my mystery self because the reflecting Other of my self is my present self [cái hiện thể] but not my mysterious self [cái nhiệm thể]. However, the present self is not my self. As a result, seeing the Other as a mirror of my own self fails to find my self. (Lý 1960, 38)

Lý Chánh Trung’s way out of this charge rests on his view of the ideal or true self as the future self. This somehow contradicts his view of an integral self of the past, present, and future because it takes one moment—the future—to be the self while denying its past and present. This is a form of bad faith. The only way out is to add the existential view of Sartre, which is that the self finally emerges as a narrative after one’s death, in other words, in one’s biography. But an additional problem emerges: Since everyone dies and leaves a biography, it follows that
additional criteria are needed for the assessment of that biography. The argument, in other words, begs the questions.

Who Am I? The Self-Other Structure Manifested in the Dialectic of Losing-Consciousness-of-Vietnamese Origins

Recall that Lý Chánh Trung, Nguyen Van Trung, and many other Vietnamese intellectuals grew up and were educated under the French school system in Vietnam and overseas. Losing-consciousness-of-Vietnamese-origins is a social phenomenon that they and their contemporaries, especially Vietnamese intellectuals, encountered as a part of their lived experience. This phenomenon relates to the main existential question raised by Vietnamese thinkers: Who am I? Their awakening of their experience of losing-consciousness-of-Vietnamese-origins leads to some of them being drawn into despair, hopelessness, and loneliness because they failed to realize their project and suffered isolation and alienation when living among other Vietnamese people. Others struggled to return to their Vietnamese cultural roots. Those affirmed their agency and escaped alienation in living among other Vietnamese. This group includes Lý Chánh Trung and Nguyen Van Trung. They consciously questioned their experience of Western education; they developed a theory of social revolution and became progressive Vietnamese existential humanists, which we could also call.

The dialectic of losing-consciousness-of-Vietnamese-origins is described interestingly in Lý Chánh Trung’s memoir Tìm về dân tộc [Returning to the Nation] through a dialectical movement of several moments: (1) living comfortably and naturally within the Vietnamese
culture with fellow Vietnamese and enjoying simple, poor living conditions full of love and close interpersonal relationships; (2) entering the world of the French with an uncomfortable feeling as a response to a different way of life—the way of life of the supposedly “higher being,” the colonial master; (3) admiring French culture to the extent that the Vietnamese intellectuals identified with the French point of view; (4) looking down at their fellow Vietnamese as “lower beings” and Vietnamese culture as not evolved and underdeveloped culture; (5) rejecting their Vietnamese origin through the project by addressing Vietnamese flaws; (6) living in a relation with the Other—the French—the Vietnamese intellectuals also realized that they were different from the French and could not be identical with the latter; (7) recognizing the failure of the identification project, they experienced anguish and loneliness; (8) struggling to return to their Vietnamese origin; and (9) being aware of a need for a social revolution as a way to affirm their Vietnamese identity.

All these steps can be condensed into a three-phase dialectic: the pre-reflective national consciousness→losing-consciousness-of-Vietnamese-origins→reflective national consciousness or consciously returning to a Vietnamese national consciousness. Let us examine the pre-reflective national consciousness in which Lý Chánh Trung as a representative of Vietnamese human fellows living in and with their community naturally. In this form of being in the world, consciousnesses of self and Other have not emerged. The I is lived as identical with the Other in a form of communal living style:

Here [Nguyễn Văn Khuê\textsuperscript{67} school] there is no subtle division but all is Annam students who share the same fate and living style. We live in this Annam world just as fish is in the water. Neither there is self superiority nor inferiority complex. We are who we are; that is all.\textsuperscript{68} (Lý 1972, 35)

The advantage of being in this stage is that there was no complex about the self. At the same time, its disadvantage is that the self did not know itself well in the sense that self-identity
is a meaning constituted by the act of consciousness directing toward a different Other. Life was simple and undivided.

The moment Lý Chánh Trung moved to Taberd high school, the experience of losing-consciousness-of-Vietnamese-origins is constituted by the act of consciousness attending toward the French and the French world. At the same time, this also was an opportunity for him to know clearly who he was by and through the meeting with the Other—the French in this struggle to return to his original roots. As he introspected, there are three features that make his experiences of studying in a Vietnamese school and that of a French school different (Lý 1972, 21-35). By coming to realize the French world as a world of discipline and the well-organized, Lý Chính Trung also gained a better understanding of his Vietnamese roots and its culture such as its poorness but full of communal sharing life: “gaining discipline; losing friendliness” (Lý 1972, 23). Being introduced to Catholicism in French school, Lý Chính Trung came to understand that he and his Vietnamese fellows did not have any specific religion:

For us, Catholicism was completely unknown… We considered it something that does not belong to our world. This feeling was not only for Catholicism but also other religions. Catholicism was the strangest because it was seen as “foreigner’s religion”… Indeed, my generation was atheist. Therefore, religious sentiment which leads to the experience of anguish while seeking for the finality of the meaning of life is not something natural but is created by and through educational environment. (Lý 1972, 25)

As a Vietnamese, Lý Chính Trung first felt uneasy learning Catholicism:

The most painful thing I have experienced [under the Catholic education in the Taberd school] was to count a whole beat necklace as a ritual at the beginning of every afternoon class. The weather was too hot that I felt as if I were roasted, the low voice prays were as long as infinity, while standing still, my hands and legs were itching as if there were hundred thousands of ants creeping. (Lý 1972, 26)

The feeling of uneasiness confronting Catholicism was soon overcome and replaced with admiration as soon as Lý Chính Trung got used to it. Furthermore, he also acknowledged that
understanding Catholicism and Christ was the most precious gift he got from the Taberd school because Catholicism taught him, as he observes, to become a good person (Lý 1972, 27).

Especially, by encountering and living in the world of the Other—the foreigner/the French— in his everyday life, Lý Chánh Trung consciously reflected more about who he and the Vietnamese were. This is the process of knowing the self through the Other. It goes through a moment of losing-consciousness-of-Vietnamese-origins. Lý Chánh Trung gradually became self-aware of who he was. The first exploration was of himself as the Other—the French/the master/the higher being. The project of self-Other identification first went through the process of admiring the Other’s culture as perfect and the self’s roots as flawed. Lý Chánh Trung reflects on his feeling of pride when he was able to separate [tách rời] himself from other poor Vietnamese by joining the French world in a Sunday church ritual:

I was kneeling on an external row of the middle chair rows joining the “upper class families” [gia đình danh giá]. Seeing several foreign kids, I was remembering Michel [Lý Chánh Trung’s schoolmate at Taberd] and felt that I was closer to them [foreign kids] than the Annam kids elbowing themselves into the crow in the wing-chair-rows.
I can never forget this feeling: the comfort and easy feeling realizing that I belong to a higher, more fragrant, and more beautiful social group, kneeling on a separate chair with cushion detaching from the surrounding smelled crawly mass.
Moving from Nguyễn Văn Khuê School to Taberd School I detached myself from the mass to join the upper class. [Explanation added] (Lý 1972, 29-30)

Lý Chánh Trung’s feeling of “belonging” to the “higher” human beings was his experience of rejecting his own roots:

On that day, a sport performance was organized at Cercle Sportif where is now Tao Đàn stadium [in Saigon]. I was in the Taberd team in the white uniform corrected dressed right next to Michel. We encountered the Nguyễn Văn Khuê team in front of the Cercle: they looked untidy and slovenly. Some of my old friends [from Nguyễn Văn Khuê] called my mane friendly and enthusiastically when seeing me. Michel asked me: “are they your old friends?” I felt uneasy and ashamed of these old friends as if a rich person had to introduce his poor relative to his rich and elegant friend. I did not answer Michel but shrugged my shoulders as if I were a Westerner. [Explanation added] (Lý 1972, 31)
The more I entered the Western world, the more I was angry at the Annam world of which I have to be a part, the more I saw their flaws and unrefined features that belong to the yellow people with flat noses who I am a part of because I have yellow skin and flat nose the more I am angry…

My grandparents had a habit to have famers staying for meals when they visited. I did not pay attention before [the Taberd school years]; however, I now feel uneasy eating with these good-natured famers. Behaviors that typically belong to famers such as having a drunken brawl after drinking only a few glasses of alcohol, drinking soup noisily, using toothpick and cleaning their mouths noisily makes my skin crawl. [Explanation added] (Lý 1972, 32-33)

He suddenly saw all the ugliness of the Vietnamese that he did not see before he entered the French school of Taberd because his point of view was shifted from the Vietnamese point of view to that of Westerners—the French. He identified himself as a French man, who was “higher” than the poor Vietnamese, and his dominant culture was French culture—the strong and male character in relation to the weak and female Vietnamese culture. His interesting observation about his experience studying at the Providence School in Huế shows that after the years at Taberd, Lý Chánh Trung was alienated from the Vietnamese culture caused by the French educational system in Vietnam. When he moved to Providence in 1943, he did not know that Vietnam had its own flag, national anthem, and that there was an Indochinese Scout other than the Scouts de France while he knew very well about French culture with Le Cid, Horace, Cicéron, Tacite, Corneille, Racine, Homère, and Virgile (Lý 1972, 38, 40). The Vietnamese mentality manifested in its material cultural items in Hue was completely foreign, ugly, and negative to him:

Floating yellow flag [Vietnamese flag], the imposing wall reflecting on the blue Perfume River [sông Hương in Huế city] do not appeal my feeling of national pride at all. In contrast, all these seeming mould, decadent, old-fashion things have nothing to do with me. [Explanation added] (Lý 1972, 36)
… This present Annam is like a very pale and puny Hue girl leaning on her strong French husband. How I cannot feel closer to a man’s aggression than a woman’s weakness when I am a male adolescent! (Lý 1972, 37)

While living in Hue, the more I divorced from the Annam world, the more I felt I was a Westerner. (Lý 1972, 38).

By losing and denying his Vietnamese roots, Lý Chánh Trung seemed to become a French colored by Catholicism with the ideal of a good person. Tragically, losing his Vietnamese point of view, he, as he himself realized, did not become a Frenchman but an abstract and general person. Just as Merleau-Ponty’s view on a true seeing as inhabiting the object seen while the object is connected with other objects as a co-existent reality from one point of view located in one’s body at each moment while not excluding the multiplicity of points of view (heres) at different moments (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 77-83, 112-170), Lý Chánh Trung thought of Vietnamese culture as his point of view. Losing the Vietnamese way of thinking by being blocked to “inhabit,” to borrow Merleau-Ponty’s word, into the Vietnamese culture, was to lose his point of view as the body emerging into its world and his seeing as taking into his “eyes” the whole cultural items as his grounding in the world. As a result, Lý Chánh Trung, as he realized, failed truly “to see” the world. He was everywhere and nowhere—in, in other words, a form of bad faith:

Here [at Providence] I gained strong background to understand and appreciate the equal, humane, and profound Western culture. I fully grasped Catholicism to realize the call to direct my life to the good.

This education [French educational system in Vietnam] includes many components, which helps me become a “human being”. I regretted that this “human being” cultivated here is not a Vietnamese human being! The native land is completely absent right in the mist of the native land. (Lý 1972, 39)

In the best case, such an educational system can only help us become good “men”, but these good “men” are abstract and general men without any ground in their own mother land. Hegel said that there were no general men but you and I
being in this nation, at this specific historical time. There are nations and history; there are you and me. (Lý 197240-41)

By saying that “the native land is completely absent right in the mist of the native land,” Lý Chánh Trung means that the French educational system in Vietnam only taught French culture to the Vietnamese. Though it introduced some Vietnamese literature, its French teachers barely spoke Vietnamese and only knew Vietnamese literature from their French point of view (Lý 1972, 40). As a result, the education did not equip the Vietnamese with its traditional mentality. The Vietnamese were alienated from their culture right in their own country.

The worse case was that the French education in Vietnam alienated the Vietnamese to the extent that the Vietnamese completely lost themselves into the French that they did not understand what it means to be independent. These Vietnamese believed that they were French and that the French was always independence. In 1945, when the Japanese invaded and the French occupation was temporally ended in Vietnam, Lý Chánh Trung and his school mates from French schools were completely shocked when other Vietnamese, who were not losing-consciousness-of-their-Vietnamese-origins—celebrated the independence of Vietnam from the French:

Independent Vietnam! The word “Việt-Nam” sounds strange; the word “independence” [độc lập] sounds ever weirder. To be honest, at that moment, we did not have any idea about national independence…

… “What is independence?” This foolish question represented our shared thought. Indeed, we could not understand… (Lý 197241)

Losing Vietnamese national consciousness led these Vietnamese to the feelings of anguish and loneliness right in the midst of their motherland:

After 20 year later, the saying [“what is independence?”] and my feeling of loneliness and coldness among and toward my dear Vietnamese fellows during the shared happy day of the whole nation still present clearly in my mind. [Explanation added] (Lý 197242)
The dialectic of the losing-consciousness-of-Vietnamese-origins in this case is thus twofold. When it is directed toward its Vietnamese fellows and its traditional culture, it identifies itself with the French. However, when it is attended to the French and the French colonial system in Vietnam, it negates its Frenchness. This dialectic was manifested clearly in Lý Chánh Trung’s description of his experience of failure to identify himself with the French. Lý Chánh Trung experienced himself clearly as a Vietnamese when his consciousness was directed toward the French and the colonial structure in a French school system. The experience of a Vietnamese living within a French colonial structure was conflicted, contradicted, and frustrated. Going through this existential crisis, Lý Chánh Trung recognized clearly than ever that the colonial social structure created a social pressure on the Vietnamese to bear a project that could never be achieved—the impossible project to become the French in a colonial situation.74

Reading Lý Chánh Trung’s memoir, we can address two main reasons that undermine this project. First, earlier in Revolution and Morality, Lý Chánh Trung arrived at the conclusion that one’s body is a part of who one is. In Returning to the Nation, Lý Chánh Trung claims that though his consciousness had shifted to the French point of view, he was still Vietnamese since he could not refuse his Vietnamese body—black hair, yellow skin, and flat nose. On the same point, Nguyễn Động Ngọc wrote of a Vietnamese deeply rooted in his Vietnamese body even at the moment of death:

And those who died by any reason and in any way died with their body with flat nose and yellow skin. Whoever these people are, they died with their own Vietnamese conditions… these death are innocent. Tragically and sadly, they can never have an opportunity to witness their fatherland’s future peaceful life. (Nguyễn 1965a25)
Second, the colonial structure is so hierarchical that it draws a dividing line between the colonists and the colonized that a Vietnamese cannot break even when the latter side s with the former; he still is socially “lower” than the foreigner (Lý 1972, 33-34). Lý Chánh Trung writes:

The psychology of a Vietnamese living in a Western world was very complicated because he could not become a “real” Westerner while living in that world. On the one hand, he feels he is “superior” to other Vietnamese because of his close connection to the Westerners; on the other hand, he feels he is “inferior” to the Westerners at some points. More exactly, we were not “inferior” to the Westerners. In contrast, we were “superior” to the Westerners at many points, especially in studying and learning. There were no foreign students who achieved the highest rank in our classes all these high school years. Once, I listened to two French teachers’ discussion on reasons why Western students were inferior to Vietnamese students in classes, one of them argued that Western students could not be at the top rank in these classes because of the hot weather in Vietnam. We are not inferior but still feel inferiority because one was forced to become who one could not be in a colonial society: how could we have their straight noses, curry hair, and blue eyes; how was a Vietnamese considered a real Westerner in a colonial society even one legally attained Western citizenship? To balance our inferiority complex, we looked down at these foreign students considering them stupid and foolish. We taught them Vietnamese curses. Every time they repeated these bad words foolishly, we laughed at them. (Lý 197234-35)

Lý Chánh Trung finally struggled to return to his Vietnamese origins by and through participating in the Vietnamese cause for the French resistance (Lý 1972, 43-50). When his consciousness was directed to the actual French resistance, a new meaning emerged—his national consciousness was born first with concrete concerns raised in Vietnam. Witnessing the heroic death of his fellow Vietnamese fighting for national independence, Lý Chánh Trung, for the first time, understood what it means to be independent:

We saw heroic deaths among unknown deaths. We understood what nation means. Virgile, Cicéron, Racine, Corneille are still with us. However, the feelings of loneliness went away.

… Our mind was full of swords as that of many other Vietnamese. At that time, we found our own standpoint [chỗ đứng] in our own mother land. (Lý 1972, 49)
By 1945, Lý Chánh Trung’s consciousness reached its turning point: from losing-consciousness-of-Vietnamese-origins to reflective-national-consciousness. This final stage was significantly different from his pre-reflective national consciousness during his Nguyên Văn Khuê school years. His self was not realized concretely by the time he was at Nguyên Văn Khuê school period because the Self had not yet encountered the “appealing and challenging” French Other. His national consciousness during the Nguyên Văn Khuê school years, like that of other Vietnamese, was taken for granted as a part of the Vietnamese natural life living in and manifesting the Vietnamese tradition unreflectively. Only during and after the struggle with the French and the poor Vietnamese was Lý Chánh Trung’s consciousness concretely articulated.

During the Taberd and Providence school years, Lý Chánh Trung was with other French students trained by French teachers under French curricula, which led to his French identifying project and losing-consciousness-of-his-Vietnamese-origins. By this time, his understanding of himself was still very abstract—to become a good but general man—because of his losing his own Vietnamese point of view. After the failure of his French identifying project, he consciously struggled to seek his own point of view in the world by and through returning to the Vietnamese national consciousness constituted by the act of consciousness directing toward Vietnam’s own lived experience of resisting French and American domination. By the year 1966 when he wrote “Foreign School” for his memoir Returning to the Nation, his Self was much more concretized because the good or finality as the goal of his life-long project was clear: to struggle for equality and humanity for the poor Vietnamese. Revolution and Morality was written in 1960. I see this book as Lý Chánh Trung’s summary of Western theories about what he had learned from French schools in which he united all different theories based on his own experience of seeking his self by and through meeting the Other—both the French and the poor Vietnamese. In addition, by
the time this book was written, communism was triumphant and was materialized in the Soviet and the North Vietnamese systems. His consciousness, therefore, was directed toward communism and communist regimes. A new meaning was constituted: a possibility of a non-communist social revolution in Vietnam based on limits of communism and communist social revolutions. The ideal of a non-violent revolution, therefore, was part of his consciousness.

After the fall of the Diem regime in 1963 and to 1965, he constantly worked on a theory of a non-communist social revolution in the context of South Vietnam. His ideas were published in a series of articles by the journal *Hành trình*. His consciousness, therefore, was contextualized by the Vietnamese social and political context. It now had its own point of view, which was no longer identical with that of the French.

Up to this point, we are able to sum up the answer to the question of who, according to Lý Chánh Trung, the self is. The self is a becoming toward its ideal self articulated by and through the meeting with the Other, which is decided by the self’s freedom of choice. The ideal self is a becoming because it is articulated in and through the self’s extension of its social relation with the Other.75 This also is the core of the open morality as a journey seeking and articulating one’s true or ideal self that Lý Chánh Trung embraces. Such a morality, however, requires recognition from and by the Other as condition for such an individual and personal morality to realize itself in practice. Then, the question we have to answer is that of how the Self “sees” itself as a free subject who is responsible to choose its ideal self and realize the ideal self in reality and at the same time “sees” the Other as a free subject who chooses and realizes her or his ideal self. How such a subject-subject relation can be realized in practice without dehumanizing one subject in the ought-to-be-subject-subject-structure into an object is the main concern. In other words, how is humanity76 realized in practice in human relations? Here,
humanity is understood as recognition of the self to itself as a free subject and to the Other as a free subject and *vice versa*. If there is a difference between the Self’s ideal self and the Other’s ideal self, how the different ideal selves are supported in the Self-Other relationship? That is, how is diversity embraced in a social structure? To answer this question in the context of Vietnam during the 1960s through 1970s, Lý Chánh Trung argues that a social revolution as a means to achieve morality is needed.

Who is South Vietnam’s Ideal Self? Open Morality as Social Revolution’s Goals

Lý Chánh Trung’s early view on the Self’s ideal self as the great Other is needed for his theory of revolution to work with his theory of open morality. Benefiting from Husserl’s theory of the structure of intentionality (Husserl 1964; Husserl 1998), we will see that the Self’s ideal self is not the Other but meanings and possibilities constituted by the Other through the self’s intentionality toward the Other. By understanding the self’s ideal self as such, Lý Chánh Trung’s theory of open morality becomes his theory of social revolution’s goals and that morality and politics are internally connected. This move from Lý Chánh Trung’s general moral theory to a concrete theory of revolution is an exemplar of the Vietnamese existential thinkers’ turning point because their philosophical views are contextualized by the Vietnamese contexts and lived experiences. After the fall of Diem in 1963, the Vietnamese existential thinkers, especially Nguyen Van Trung, recognized that the self is constituted by the society it lives in. Therefore, answering the question who the self is leads to the task of disclosing the social structure of South Vietnam (rather than a general social structure) as a form of the South
Vietnamese’s Other. The moment the Vietnamese existential thinkers’ consciousnesses were directed to the concrete social structure of Vietnam, their social and political theories were meanings constituted by both objects of their consciousnesses and their consciousnesses’ act. From then on, it is inaccurate to claim that the Vietnamese existential moral, social and political theories are imitations of the French existential philosophies. The French existential thinkers did not unveil the Vietnamese social structure. They did not search for who the Vietnamese are or how the Vietnamese ideal selves could realize themselves. The issue of national liberation and a non-Communist social revolution in the context of an American neo-colony and socialism became the problem they had to live through and to reflect upon. This move distinguishes the Vietnamese existential philosophies from that of the French existential thinkers. It defines the former’s contribution to the world philosophy broadly construed.

From the first person perspective, Lý Chánh Trung, a South Vietnamese Catholic intellectual, considered South Vietnam the Self and North Vietnam the Other. The relationship between the South and the North, therefore, can be seen as the relationship between the Self and the Other. Earlier in *Revolution and Morality*, Lý Chánh Trung embraced a mutual recognition between the Self and the Other as free subjects. In “Cách mạng để tiến tới hòa bình” [Revolution to Peace], Lý Chánh Trung, while respecting the North’s freedom of choosing and realizing communism as the North’s ideal self, asked the North to recognize and accept the South as a free subject who has the right to realize its ideal self:

> There cannot have absolute judgments in the fields of politics, economy, and society. As a result, the “communists” and the “anti-communists” both have the right to live in this country [Vietnam]. They both have the right to suggest the people to experiment their methods to resolve the country’s basic issues. (Lý 1965, 32-33)
Lý Chánh Trung’s idea for a social revolution in South Vietnam works only when and if this basic right—“both ‘communists’ and ‘anti-communists’ have the right to live in this country”—is recognized. If it were the case, then, the task for South Vietnam was to seek and define its ideal self so as to realize its ideal self in reality. For Lý Chánh Trung and many other South Vietnamese intellectuals, especially the Hành trình group, seeking an ideal self for the South—who and what South Vietnam wants to become—and how to realize this ideal self is the main existential and political task. It is an existential task because it emerges immediately from the practice that forces them as *individuals* to think about as a part of their personal life-decision-making. As Nguyen Van Trung puts, this is the “văn đề sống còn” [the most basic issue that would decide the life and death of a country and therefore, each individual]. It is a political task because it is what the South had to deal with in the Vietnam War with the North to become a provisionally independent nation. From the general theory of an open morality as we discussed in the previous part, Lý Chánh Trung, in his later writings after *Revolution and Morality*, moved to a more specific question raised by the actual practice of South Vietnam: who is the South Vietnam’s ideal self? This is actually the question what are South Vietnam’s revolutionary goals?

To answer this question, Lý Chánh Trung’s earlier view that the great Other is the Self’s ideal has to be reconstructed the way I suggested. That is, the self’s ideal self is *not* identical with the great Other. Rather, the Self’s ideal self is constituted by meanings at each moment the Self is being directed to the Other. Reconstructing Lý Chánh Trung’s view of Self-Other this way, I am able (1) to extend Lý Chánh Trung’s conception of the Other that includes the common Other—workers, farmers, and the poor that later Lý Chánh Trung develops; (2) to make sense of Lý Chánh Trung’s very core political claim that what South Vietnam needed was a
social revolution of and for the poor; and (3) to make Lý Chánh Trung’s early and later writings consistent, clearer, and more systematic.

Now, let us first consider Lý Chánh Trung’s early view of the Self’s ideal self as the great Other that the Self looks up, admires, and wants to become to his later writings on a social revolution in South Vietnam to indicate how Lý Chánh Trung’s earlier view of the Self’s ideal self does not make sense in his later writing. In “Lá bài cuối cùng của miền Nam: Cách mạng của người nghèo” [The Last Card of South Vietnam: A Revolution of the Poor] (1964), Lý Chánh Trung argues that what South Vietnam needed was a social revolution of and for the poor that actually changes the foundations of all previous societies. That is, previous revolutions were replacements of one unequal society with another unequal society in which governments were to protect and maintain the ruling classes’ privileges while the life of the people (the mass) was unchanged: they were and are always poor. To do so, the rich and non-poor social groups including intellectuals must revolutionize themselves by joining the poor: to give up their property, to live poorly with the poor and participate in the poor’s revolution with the poor (Lý 1964, 23). This claim is problematic because Lý Chánh Trung was still stuck in his earlier view of the great Other as the Self’s ideal self. His view of the Other was already extended from the great Other to the common Other—the poor—while he had not yet worked out that the self’s ideal self as meanings constituted by the Self’s intentionality toward the Other but still held that the Self is the Other. Lý Chánh Trung’s search for his ideal self as well as the South Vietnam’s ideal self in is later writings was not articulated by a great Other to whom he used to claim that the Self looks up at, admires, and wants to become but by the poor Vietnamese. His ideal self as the South Vietnamese ideal self was articulated in his vocation to struggle for a society that can bring food, clothing; dignity, equality, and democracy to the poor and everyone in the society.
By having closer concern for the poor and understanding the poor’s living conditions, Lý Chánh Trung himself extended his old conception of the Other as a condition for the self to know itself from the great Other to the poor—the common Other. Lý Chánh Trung, as an intellectual, clearly did not want to become the poor in the sense that he wanted to become a poor person who does not have enough food and clothing, who is not respected, and who is forced into a critical situation by the unjust social structure where he cannot make a better life for himself regardless of how hard he works. What Lý Chánh Trung actually wants is to understand the poor’s living condition better so as to know what they need. What the revolution needs to bring to the poor is what the South Vietnam ideal self.

The old view that the Other is the Self’s ideal self led to his political suggestion that the rich and non-poor should revolutionize themselves by becoming the poor. This led to his suggestion that the rich and non-poor including intellectuals must give up their property to be the poor in order to effect a social revolution for the poor. This led to a possible misunderstanding that the social revolution may make eliminate the rich as Lý Chánh Trung realized himself, which was not what he wanted to suggest. This misunderstanding would be cleared up if Lý Chánh Trung were clearer about who the Self’s ideal self were by moving to my suggestion that the Self’s ideal self was a set of plural meanings. The rich would not have to be eliminated by the abrogation of their property under this view. Rather, they just need to understand the living condition of the poor closely so they could understand the need for a social revolution to bring food, clothing; dignity, equality, and democracy to the poor by committing themselves to this ideal self and doing what is necessary to create such social change. That is, the rich and well off would make a free choice of whom they want to become by taking the ideal self articulated in the ideas of a social revolution bringing food, cloths, dignity, equality, and democracy to the poor.
Only by reconstructing Lý Chánh Trung’s Self’s ideal self as meanings constituted by the Self’s intentionality to the Other can we make sense of his claim in “Lá bài cuối cùng của Miền Nam: Cách mạng của người nghèo” [The Last Card of South Vietnam: A Revolution of the Poor] that a social revolution of and for the poor does not make the rich poorer or eliminate the rich or exclude the rich but brings better material and cultural conditions to the poor so they have equal opportunities to be successful in the society (Lý 1964, 19). The poor is here understood not as South Vietnam’s ideal self but as a present reality calling for the material act of revolution.\(^8^2\)

With the reconstruction of the self’s ideal self as meanings and possibilities constituted by the Self’s intentionality toward the Other, we now are at the position to answer the question who the South Vietnam’s ideal self is. It, according to Lý Chánh Trung, is a society that embraces a social structure that is able to bring food, clothes, dignity, equality, and democracy to the poor and everyone in the society (Lý 1965, 36-37). This is what Lý Chánh Trung believes should be the South Vietnam’s social revolutionary goals. Now, the question how to realize this ideal self in practice emerged. Lý Chánh Trung’s answer is that South Vietnam has to do a social revolution.
Vietnamese existential philosophy is neither an imitation of European existentialism nor a type of quietism. My goal in this chapter is to provide additional evidence of the gulf that separates Vietnamese existentialism from its European counterparts. In particular, I will focus on Vietnamese existential philosophy's prominent concern with social revolution. Reflecting the social and political reality of French and American colonization in the aftermath of World War II, Vietnamese existential thinkers advanced a form of political existential philosophy aimed at destroying the violent society imposed by their colonizers. In developing a revolutionary agenda, Vietnamese existentialism had much in common with their Marxist counterparts who sought to attain Vietnamese independence.

The following sections offer a critical analysis of Lý Chánh Trung’s and Nguyen Van Trung’s views on social revolution in South Vietnam. On the one hand, I argue that they are existential humanists: their theories of revolution consider the realization of each individual’s ideal self as the revolution’s highest goal. Their theories of revolution focus upon the poor, seeking to achieve equality for everyone in the society. The humanism of Lý Chánh Trung and Nguyen Van Trung also surfaces in their emphasis upon the role of subjectivity in choosing revolutionary means and goals. History does not determine any individual’s project; each individual must choose a revolutionary path for herself or himself. Although Lý Chánh Trung and Nguyen Van Trung were proponents of revolution, they envisioned a non-communist revolution, suggesting that there were diverse means to achieve the transformation of society.
including processes of reform. Lý Chánh Trung and Nguyễn Văn Trung also offer important insights into dimensions of injustice in the context of colonialism and imperialism—insights that remain relevant to Vietnam’s current encounter with globalization. On the other hand, I argue that these theories of social revolution in South Vietnam are *utopian*. Envisioned at a moment when Vietnam lacked the objective and subjective conditions for a successful revolution, they could not help but be utopian. Nonetheless, these Vietnamese existentialists help lay the groundwork for the development of revolutionary consciousness, a critical subjective condition for social revolution.

**On the Need for Social Revolution**

According to Nguyễn Văn Trung, after the fall of Diệm in 1963 South Vietnam required a social revolution for multiple reasons. South Vietnam had lost its *political independence* and become a neo-colony of the United States of America. Vietnam’s colonial status was perpetuated even as the nationality of the colonizer shifted from France to the USA. The Vietnamese were not accorded the fundamental right of self-determination. They were not allowed to participate in important negotiations to decide their nation’s political fate.

In the article “Chủ quyền quốc gia trước sự can thiệp và chi phối của ngoại bang” [National Independence Confronting Foreign Intervention and Control] (Nguyen 1970, 95-105), Nguyễn Văn Trung noted that despite its declaration of independence, South Vietnam was *not* an independent country after 1945. The king, Bảo Đại, and his government were established by the French and functioned as a French puppet and lackey (Nguyen 1970, 96). Similarly from 1954 to 1963, although South Vietnam had its own government under President Diệm, it remained a neo-colony of the United States of America—a society that was economically and
politically dependent on the US. South Vietnam depended on the USA for financial aid and political advice. Although the United States claimed its intervention in South Vietnam was to protect South Vietnam’s independence and to protect the “free world,” US geopolitical objectives had far more to do with Cold War politics and its effort to contain the spread of communism (Nguyen 1970, 97-98). After the fall of Diem regime in 1963, Nguyen Van Trung noted that South Vietnam became a complete colony, depending increasingly on the US military occupation to shore up its government. South Vietnam’s government became “the US helper” in the war against North Vietnam. The main forces operating in the war and in negotiations to end the war were North Vietnam and American military. South Vietnam’s government lost its political voice in negotiation with North Vietnam and with the US.

Regardless whatsoever it declared, South Vietnamese nationalist government may not be asked for their views in the negotiations for a cease-fire; it had no self-determination in political bargaining, plans for Vietnam were discussed in Washington, London, Moscow, and Hanoi (Nguyen 1970, 100).  

Characterizing the US justification for its intervention in South Vietnam as a myth, Nguyen Van Trung (1970, 82-89) suggested that the US had ulterior motives: “… the Americans came here mainly because of their national interests. It only wants Vietnam to be its new market under its influence; that is, to become a neo-colony” (Nguyen 1970, 104-105). The more the US military “helps” South Vietnam, the more South Vietnam loses its relative independence. It does not have power to determine how many US. troops should be in Vietnam; the US military does not ask the Vietnamese government for their opinion about increases in American troops on Vietnamese soil. Moreover the South Vietnamese government did not have enough power to oppose the North. Indeed its support for U.S. military intervention was fueling growing resistance of the South Vietnamese Communists (Việt còng) against US military occupation. “The more the South Vietnamese nationalist government is divided… the more the National
Liberation Front has reasons to exist and their struggle has more just cause” (Nguyen 1970, 99). Contrary to their explicit objectives, then, the government of South Vietnam was contributing to the birth of a new national consciousness, growing in opposition to American military occupation and atrocities.

South Vietnam also needed a social revolution to throw off its economic and social colonial structure. Nguyen Van Trung traced the complex operations of Western imperialism in South Vietnam, whose economy had grown dependent on US aid. As Nguyen Van Trung pointed out, US financial aid was not helping Vietnam to develop its economy independently or in ways that benefitted all the people. It was creating class divisions, providing wealth for one small cohort who collaborated with American objectives, while creating a large gap between the rich and the poor, cities and rural areas, owners of the means of production and workers and famers. American financial aid was also creating a consumer society that did not support the growth of Vietnamese manufacturing and production facilities, but encouraged spending on high-priced imported products.

Independence does not have any meaning if the nation is not economically independent. Take me as an example; I am able to understand what it means by “neo-colonialism” without any professional knowledge on economy and political science. The clothes I am wearing are made from imported tergal nylon. When I woke up in the morning, I turned on the lights and washed my face. The power and water are provided by a foreign company. Even the razor blade and the soap I am using are imported. If I had a car driving to work, it must have been make in Germany, Italy, Japan, the United States of America, or England, and used gas imported from the US. My house is rented. Drinks, wine, and beer are also provided by foreign companies. These products are everywhere from cities to rural areas, insidiously creating demand even among average people who have not seen these products before. My salary mostly is covered by aid funds. Although grown by Vietnamese, the rice I eat is bought from a Chinese sole agent who sweeps off all the rice available on the domestic market. One of my relatives works for an American company as a secretary. Another relative is an accountant for a French business, etc. (Nguyen 1970, 39).
In addition to protesting growing inequalities among different social classes and groups within South Vietnam, Nguyen Van Trung called attention to the dirty origin of financial aid from foreign countries, pointing out that the money comes from unfair international trade between developed and developing countries. Developing countries sell their raw materials at cheap prices to capitalists in developed countries who produce and export their goods to the developing countries where they are sold at high prices, generating huge profits for the wealthy nations. The profit earned from unfair international trade, then, tends to be generated by the exploitation of workers in poor nations. According to Nguyen Van Trung, Vietnam needs new and fair modes of international trade so it could sell its raw products at fair prices and import fairly-priced products rather than receive American “financial aid.”

In the international trade relation between developing and developed countries, the former just export raw materials and import products/goods. However, developed countries are sole agents who decide their products’ market prices in accordance with standards that benefit them. Therefore, people wish that, if market prices for raw materials increased and the selling prices of completed products/good were reduced a little bit, then the surplus would be as equal as or even higher than the amount of financial aid these developed counties gave to the developing countries. (Nguyen 1970, 42)

Beyond its ties to exploited labor, US financial aid was not helping South Vietnam to develop an independent economy. Vietnam was using these funds to purchase weapons from developed countries, especially from the US. Thus US aid to Vietnam was returned to the US to benefit US weapons production, creating more jobs for American workers (Nguyen 197043-44, 88). In this sense, the Vietnam War was benefitting the US and South Vietnamese ruling and upper classes. Echoing Josué de Castro’s Quel Avenir attend l’homme? Rencontre International de Royaumont, Nguyen Van Trung asks exactly what “help” means when colonized countries export their surplus
labor in the form of capital to colonizing countries to benefit the colonizers’ companies and workers (Nguyen 1970, 43).

South Vietnam also needed a social revolution to bring food to the majority of working people who lacked adequate food in their daily lives. Under French colonialism, the Vietnamese had been encouraged to devote their land to the production of raw materials for export. As less land was devoted to subsistence agriculture, Vietnam lost its self-sufficiency in agricultural production. As a consequence, the country had to import high-priced food, which imposed great hardships on farmers and workers who earned very low incomes. As the poor grew poorer from devoting their low incomes to the purchase of expensive food, members of South Vietnam’s ruling group was benefiting from foreign aid, indeed, growing richer through corruption (Nguyen 1970, 42). As the affluence of the ruling group fed off the people’s suffering, the class disparity within Vietnam increased. The economic disparities between cities and rural areas also increased because the affluent ruling and upper classes primarily lived in cities, while the working classes, especially the farmers, lived in poor rural areas. As increasing numbers of foreign companies opened offices and production facilities in urban areas, large numbers of workers migrated to the cities to work for these companies. Paid very low incomes, these workers sought accommodations in very poor living conditions such as slums (Nguyen 1970, 40-41). For Nguyen Van Trung private ownership of the means of production—by transnational companies and by Vietnamese land owners—was the fundamental cause of growing inequalities in Vietnam.

Although Nguyen Van Trung clearly rejected dependency-creating financial aid, he was also very practical, noting that as a small and poor country, Vietnam needed help from other countries to strengthen itself. In “We as Problem,” he noted, “We do not reject aid programs
because we need aid; even Eastern European socialist countries have to receive the US aid; so do we. However, we reject the aid program that violates the nation’s self-determination and that paralyzes our nation’s independent development’” (Nguyen 1970, 132). Keenly attuned to the mechanisms by which “aid” fostered dependency, he called attention to neo-colonial dynamics detrimental to Vietnam’s independence.

The nature of the neo-colonialism lies right in its aid program: an aid program that leads to the fact that the more aid a country receives, the more aid it needs to the extent that it has a permanent need of aid from an aid-giving country simply because if there is no aid; the aid-receiving country dies immediately. Is this a form of domination? …This very dependence exposes the unrighteousness of the aid program…The righteous goal of an aid program should help the aid receiving country achieve a status in which it does not need aid any more (Nguyen 1970:129-130).

Nguyen Van Trung emphasized that South Vietnam needed a social revolution because its ruling class was not representing the people’s interest but its own. Although financial assistance from colonial powers did not benefit the people, it was supported by the Saigon government because it benefitted small groups of Vietnamese and transnational capitalists:

More exactly, the financial aid program benefits certain groups, who are foreign capitalists and capitalists of developing counties. It only harms the public interest, paralyzes the need for economic development; therefore, it reduces the people to a new type of slavery: colonialism through economic domination. As Rene Dumont reported the Congolese’s opinion “Independence is not for us but for only for city people” (Nguyen 1970, 44).

For Nguyen Van Trung, then, a social revolution was needed to overthrow a ruling class that consistently betrayed people’s interest. “Social revolutions…cannot be lead by colonial ruling class because they do not have any benefit in this revolutionary change that aims to eliminate their unjust privileges. In contrast, they [members of the ruling class] cooperate with foreign capitalists to protect their interests” (Nguyen 1970, 42).
Nguyen Van Trung offered compelling arguments for the necessity of a social revolution in Vietnam. He also pointed out, however, that it was particularly difficult to devise revolutionary tactics because of the complex machinations of so many international powers. In “We as Problem,” he observed that “The present situation is so complicated that it is beyond our capacity to understand and to act; one change happens and we do not know where it came from or who did it or for what reason. Our situation seems to be out of our own control. It is decided by plans and negotiations in Moscow, Washington, London, and Paris” (Nguyen 1970, 117). Given the plurality of foreign actors and interests operating in Vietnam, Nguyen Van Trung began to theorize anonymous domination, a form of imperial intervention so dense and complex that responsibility for particular acts of exploitation became difficult to trace.

How to Actualize the Self? The Vietnamese Non-Marxist Theory of Social Revolution

Similar to Nguyen Van Trung, Lý Chánh Trung also argued that social revolution was needed to reverse the detrimental policies of South Vietnam governments since 1954. Rather than acting on behalf of a small fraction of the population, the aims of the government of South Vietnam must be extended to encompass provision of food, clothing, health, equality, dignity, justice, and democracy for all Vietnamese. In his article “The Revolution of the Poor,” Lý Chánh Trung emphasized the importance of providing basic goods and services for the poor, but he also noted that these goals could be accomplished only with the ideological commitments of the government changed. The liberalism embraced by the South Vietnam government had failed
to bring food, cloth, equality, dignity, justice, and democracy to the Vietnamese masses.
Moreover, the South Vietnamese government’s anti-communism failed to provide a positive
vision of a non-communist society committed to justice. Focusing exclusively on what it
opposed, this mode of anti-communism was reactive rather than constructive. As such it could
not foster revolutionary attitudes on the part of the people nor achieve revolutionary goals for the
masses. For Lý Chánh Trung, a constructive attitude and revolutionary theory were needed to
achieve revolutionary objectives.

Lý Chánh Trung contributes a special aspect to the theory of revolution developed by
South Vietnamese existential thinkers because he places morality at the center and as the highest
goal of revolution. He suggests that revolution is needed not only to enable each individual to
fulfill his or her moral potential, participation in revolutionary action to eliminate prevailing
structures of violence is how the Self becomes itself in practice. In a system of colonial
oppression, moral ideals motivate action to change the present violent social structure. When
revolutionary action is chosen by each individual, their collective action becomes the means to
overthrow an immoral system. Through the collective moral act of revolution, then, moral
agents act to produce a moral world. Through action in accordance with moral ideals of their
own choosing, each moral Self creates itself. In this sense, revolution is not only a political but
also a moral concept. Revolution is political because it aims at changing social structures. It is a
moral concept because revolutionary political activities produce moral human beings acting in
and for themselves.

Lý Chánh Trung recognizes the interconnection of morality and politics. Within a
revolutionary context, politics is no longer only a process to control power and maintain
governments. Rather, it is a process to realize humanity’s potential by transforming social
structures and in the process, transforming humanity itself. Morality is no longer restricted to a private sphere in which each individual tries to self-cultivate or perfect oneself. Rather, morality permeates the public sphere as individuals act in accordance with shared moral ideals to transform political structures. Within this moral framework the realization of the humanity of each individual depends upon the realization of the full humanity of all.

Revolutionary thinkers often move from an argument for the necessity of revolution to a discussion about the appropriate means for successful revolution. Lý Chánh Trung resists this movement, arguing that there is no univocal determination of revolutionary goals and means. On the contrary, he suggests that the oppressor and the oppressed must play a central role in choosing the methods—violent or non-violent—for a successful revolution under particular circumstances. According to Lý Chánh Trung, history does not choose appropriate revolutionary means, human beings do. Examination of the revolutions orchestrated by the French, the Soviets and by Gandhi indicates that history is realized through concrete human projects and “the finality of history” is articulated through human consciousness *ex post facto.* In the midst of revolutionary turmoil, human beings do not know for sure their goals because their goals are still abstract. At a moment when reality could be actualized in many different forms, people may not be at all certain about which means to deploy to realize their chosen goals. Respect for diversity of goals and means is needed in the process of realizing humanity.86

Lê Kim Châu has criticized Lý Chánh Trung view of revolution as utopian, arguing that Lý Chánh Trung’s view of human nature is abstract, classless, and ahistorical. According to Lê Kim Châu, Lý Chánh Trung fails to understand that social revolution is a manifestation of class struggle motivated by conflicts of economic and political interests among different classes. Thus, Lê Kim Châu insists that Lý Chánh Trung’s moral revolution cannot exist in human
According to the Marxist view on revolution, a “moral revolution” that “serves men while it does not uselessly violate some other people” as Lý Chánh Trung hopes is utopian (Lê 1996, 112). Articulating an orthodox Marxist view, Lê Kim Châu posits that “revolution is a manifestation and a result of class struggle. It is clear that classes’ interests are conflictual. As a result, realizing one class’s interests harms other classes’ interests” (Lê 1996, 112).

Although I accept Lê Kim Châu’s point that Lý Chánh Trung holds an abstract and general view of human nature, I am not quite persuaded by Lê Kim Châu’s claim that social revolutions perpetually replace one kind of violence with another. To assume an endless repetition of social revolutions driven by economic and political class conflicts is too simple. Such a simplistic model omits other “mediations,” to borrow from Sartre’s language. This simplified schema fails to see qualitative development in the mutual recognition of humanity achieved through social revolutions that strive for meaningful equality. Lý Chánh Trung sees violence as the essential structure of unjust and unequal social relations under colonial forms of imperialism. Contrary to Lê Kim Châu’s view perpetual revolution would not be our fate if justice and equality were achieved through revolution. Every step toward humanity through social revolutions and social reforms enables the Self to move closer to recognizing the Other as an equal. Efforts to achieve social justice can contribute to harmonization as each person learns to live with Others in a shared society. This is a process. Lý Chánh Trung expects more from human beings who participate in revolutionary transformation. Those who emerge from revolutionary praxis are not the same as they were before participating in violence to overthrow oppressive structures. His view or moral revolution envisions Self and Other learning through practice to transcend their own interests as they act collectively to create egalitarian structures. Harmonization and reconciliation do not eliminate diversity of interests but create possibilities
for collective deliberation to allocate resources more equitably to eliminate certain class antagonisms. Absent the possibility of changing human nature through participation in revolution, a theory of perpetual revolution would be a theory of perpetual war. The Vietnamese conception of harmonization manifested in the “absolute nothingness” is helpful here because it directs social revolutions toward mutual recognition. I think Lý Chánh Trung was trying to capture this possibility when he suggested that attending to the common “vocation”—another word for mutual recognition—is mankind’s life-long project.

Although Lý Chánh Trung’s revolutionary theory was utopian, particularly in the context of American-occupied South Vietnam, it was humane and suggestive. Emphasizing the importance of equality, dignity, freedom, and democracy for the poor and for everyone in the society, Lý Chánh Trung argued for the creation of a revolutionary government that would use the state to direct the economy to the benefit of all, redistributing income and opportunities, fostering individual development through education, and creating democratic practices by including farmers and workers in decision making about all aspects of the nation’s life (Lý 1965, 40; see also Lý 1960, 122; Lý 1972, 138; Lý 1965, 26-30; Lý 1965, 23-40; Lý 1964, 18-24).

In Revolution and Morality (1960), Lý Chánh Trung argued that each individual had to revolutionize him/herself by making fundamental choices. In this sense, he lodged the starting point of social revolution in South Vietnam in each individual’s subjectivity. As each individual came to understand the nature of the injustice pervading the social structure, he/she would see the importance of change. Lý Chánh Trung never accepted the view that history is determined by natural laws or social laws. Rather, he argued that human beings as agents always have choices. History is the manifestation of projects created by individual choices based on concrete situations. Nonetheless, he believed that the egregious injustices experienced by oppressed
Vietnamese would motivate many to choose revolutionary projects directed toward the poor. When individuals freely chose to act to eradicate social injustice they would opt for appropriate revolutionary means to make their project a reality in these particular circumstances (Lý 1972, 71-82).

Lý Chánh Trung’s revolutionary theory is suggestive because it proposes an alternative to communist revolution as a means to build a just society for everybody. Lý Chánh Trung’s conception of moral revolution still has relevance to issues confronting Vietnam today. For example, his idea of a poor government suggests a need for a mechanism to monitor the ruling class to preclude corruption as much as possible. What specific mechanisms might accomplish this goal requires further investigation.

Lý Chánh Trung’s critique of both liberalism and communism as inadequate for the creation of a just society is also provocative. Rather than fixating on the opposition between liberal and communist structures, he suggests that policy makers investigate the limits of each approach and experiment with mixed models in order to meet the pressing needs of the poor. This view encourages experimenting with multiple approaches to find out which methods work well in Vietnam. If experiments yield positive results on a small scale, they could then be applied across wider areas throughout the country.

Lý Chánh Trung’s concern for preserving core moral principles in all revolutionary undertakings also contains important insights. There are different means to achieve revolutionary goals—food, clothes, equality, dignity, freedom, and democracy. Policy makers should be concerned to measure which methods are most efficient in reaching these goals. Some means may achieve the goals but only at very high costs. Lý Chánh Trung suggests that policy makers should avoid “achievement at any price,” citing as an example the Soviet Union’s
collectivization of agriculture (Lý 1965, 35-36). Moral means are particularly important for a revolutionary state that wants to justify its means and its ends. A revolutionary process cannot promote the well-being of the people by fostering unlimited suffering and bloodshed.  

Lý Chánh Trung’s political program is based on a moral theory that assumes each individual has a vocation to become a full human being by directing him/herself toward humanity and moral ideals such as equality, justice, freedom, and democracy. This approach has much in common with Vietnamese tradition influenced by Buddhist and Confucian ethics. Markedly absent from this approach, however, is a legal theory that can protect human dignity, equality, and freedom in instances when moral theory does not control individual action.  

When an individual or an organization fails to fulfill moral roles consistent with becoming a full human being, laws are needed to protect basic rights and punish those who violate them. In capitalist societies, the laws often protect the interests of the ruling elite. How to design laws that transcend class interests and protect basic human rights for all remains an open question. Gaps between the legal system on paper and its implementation in practice may also pose challenges for a revolutionary state seeking to achieve social justice. But even a more vital question for Vietnamese existential philosophers in the early 1960s was how to generate revolutionary leadership capable of freeing Vietnam from colonial imperialism.

Nguyen Van Trung on Vietnamese Social Revolutionary Leadership

After centuries of invasion and occupation by external forces, the question of national independence lay at the heart of Vietnamese political philosophy. Concomitantly questions concerning the proper nature of revolutionary leadership were also central to Vietnamese
philosophical analysis. Indeed, who could lead a social revolution in South Vietnam to eliminate American intervention became the most important question for South Vietnamese intellectuals in the early 1960s. Nguyen Van Trung (Nguyen 1970, 11-51) offered two accounts—one negative and one positive--of possible revolutionary leadership. His negative account was a critique of Vietnamese nationalists and Vietnamese urban aristocrats, whom he insisted, could not be the social revolutionary leaders. In his positive account, he suggested that young intellectuals and university students were best suited to the role of revolutionary leadership. In this section, I argue that Nguyen Van Trung’s theory of social revolutionary leadership falls short. He offers a type of nationalist consciousness that is strong on resistance but weak at construction of viable alternatives. Taking only nationalist’s consciousness of negative freedom into account, Nguyen Van Trung’s theory of social revolutionary leadership fails to recognize positive aspects of freedom—the power to manifest patriotism by and through material activities.

*The Negative Account of Vietnamese social Revolutionary Leadership*

In the negative account of Vietnamese social revolutionary leadership, Nguyen Van Trung argues that Vietnamese nationalist parties, Vietnamese colonial capitalists, Vietnamese urban ruling group, Vietnamese intellectuals who have lost their Viet-consciousness, and old-form Vietnamese French-resisting nationalists cannot lead the social revolution in South Vietnam. Vietnamese nationalist parties fail to take such a role for several reasons. According to Nguyen Van Trung, Vietnamese nationalist parties had completed their historical task—to lead a national liberation revolution. A social revolution requires different forms or
organizations of consciousness than that of a liberation revolution. From the fall of the French in
Vietnam in 1954 to the fall of Diem regime in 1963, there was no foreign invader in Vietnam;
there was no actual need for Vietnamese nationalist consciousness. Without a foreign oppressor,
there could be no Vietnamese nationalist consciousness. The new task after the national
independence revolution was to establish a new society able to realize class equality (Nguyen
1970, 20-21). Old forms of Vietnamese national consciousness born during the French
resistance did not have an elaborate program to construct such a society. Vietnamese nationalist
parties become illusive [ảo tưởng] in identifying their goals and methods to build an egalitarian
social structure because they failed to identify the main task of the period (1954-1963)—to
eliminate social inequality. Furthermore, they applied the wrong method—appealing to
patriotism to build a better society while the most effective methods must be based on class

Vietnamese nationalists were backward in the context of South Vietnam after the nation’s
independence because they tried to preserve their outdated historical mission in a new historical
era. In addition, Nguyen Van Trung claimed when the struggle against class inequality had
grown to an extent that it threatened the nationalists’ political power, they were willing to
cooperate with foreign forces to suppress the class struggle based on the working class’ interests.
Vietnamese nationalists were betraying the nation’s interest in independence to protect and
maintain their own group’s interest, that is, to maintain their government. Having failed to build
a just society for everybody, especially the working classes, they no longer represented the whole
nation’s interests.

Nguyen Van Trung identified the class origin of the Vietnamese nationalists as petty
bourgeois, bourgeois, and urban ruling group [trưởng giá thành thị]. When making policies to
develop the country, they did not pay enough attention to working classes, especially workers and farmers living in rural areas. As a result, the nationalists’ political agenda did not represent the whole country’s interest and seriously contradicted the working classes’ interests. From class interest perspective, then, they were not revolutionary and inclusive enough to lead the social revolution (Nguyen 1970, 22). Moreover, Vietnamese nationalists and their formal political organizations—the nationalist parties—were good at foreign resistance but weak at social construction. To avoid establishing a new equal society, the Vietnamese nationalist parties and their governments targeted the wrong goal—taking “anti-communism” as their main task instead of eliminating class inequality. “Anti-communism,” Nguyen Van Trung recognized, belonged to the very nature of Vietnamese national parties: from French resistance to anti-communist resistance, their actions embodied negative freedom.94

Nguyen Van Trung argued that “anti-communism” could not lead to a just society because communism was a method to resolve class inequality. In other words, communism was a way to construct a new and equal society. In this sense, communism concerned positive freedom.95 Standing against the communist solution to inequality could not address the problem of social inequality (Nguyen 1970, 23-24). To oppose communism successfully, South Vietnam would need to eliminate class inequality from which communism had emerged. To build a new society, social, economic, educational, religious and constructive methods were needed.

Communism is a way of social revolution. One can resist communism as a way of social revolution; however, one cannot oppose communism to avoid doing a social revolution because if one does not implement a social revolution, communists will do the job in their own way….An unequal, utterly depraved, controlling, and dictatorial regime that intends to oppose communism may be able to kill communists by military forces; however, this does not mean that it can eliminate communism, because communism is not an external force imposed into the society from without but is born from within the regime (Nguyen 1970, 24-25).
Agreeing with Frantz Fanon, Nguyen Van Trung argued that Vietnamese colonial capitalists failed to realize their supposed capacity to develop an independent economy for the nation. Their failure was tied to their ideals—consumerism and leisure—rather than work and innovation in production and technological development. “Colonial capitalists’ psychology is pre-capitalism heavily influenced by feudalism and bureaucracy. It is a leisured ideal, an insipid contemplation, and an attitude that looks down at work that considers education as a way out of work, especially hard work” (Nguyen 1970, 39).

According to Nguyen Van Trung (1970, 34-44), the Vietnamese urban ruling group [tăng lớp trường già thành thị] also failed to lead the social revolution because they were corrupt and utterly depraved. Their governance no longer protected the working classes’ interests but their own individual interests. They deployed their political and governmental positions in the system to gain personal advantage. For example, they accepted corrupt financial assistance from foreign countries. Their corruption led to their extreme wealth and the increasing gap between the rich and the poor. Their corrupt money was not invested in production to create jobs or strengthen domestic economy but was spent on imported luxury products, while the working classes were struggling in poverty and hunger. When this corrupt money was invested in land, the land was used to grow only export items. As a result, essential food was imported and sold at prices that famers and workers could not afford. The ruling group was getting richer on the people’s suffering.

In Nguời trí thức vong bán [Vietnamese intellectuals who have lost their Viet-consciousness], Nguyen Van Trung (1963, 172-195) argued that French colonialism in Vietnam gave birth to two types of Vietnamese intellectuals: the real Vietnamese nationalists and the Vietnamese intellectuals who have lost their Viet-consciousness by attending the French school.
and university system in Vietnam. To exploit Vietnam, the French had to educate a group of Vietnamese to work for their system as mediators between the French and the Vietnamese. The French myth of 'enlightenment' led to two possibilities: the birth of the Vietnamese nationalists who realized the gap between what they learned from the French schools about freedom, equality, and compassion and what actually happened in their country. Encountering this gap generated a consciousness to resist their dehumanized situation. The other result of French education was a kind of Vietnamese intellectuals, who rejected Vietnam, Vietnamese culture, and the Vietnamese people and identified with their oppressor—the French. By imitating the French in all things, these intellectuals sought to promote their own individual interests. By identifying with the oppressor, they received benefits from the French. They were free from hunger, suffering, and dehumanization that other oppressed Vietnamese endured. Their negative freedom understood as the absence of the lack of material resources (Berlin 1970) and the absence of dehumanized interpersonal relations required that they turn against their origins. Rather than acting as independent human beings, they chose to obey French rules and standards. They were free only within the confines afforded them by their oppressor. They did not have freedom to assert Vietnamese dignity and integrity. They did not have self-determination—the power to determine who they were, what their country would be, and how to use their country’s resources. In other words, they gave up positive freedom—freedom to define original projects using their national resources, including their land and their national heritage, to materialize their projects.

After the fall of the French in Dien Bien Phu in 1954, these Vietnamese intellectuals who had lost their Viet-consciousness continued to hold important governmental and party positions in the South Vietnamese system. As part of the urban ruling group, they could not lead the
liberation and social revolution because according to Nguyen Van Trung because they do not have Vietnamese national consciousness. South Vietnam needed a social group capable of being an umpire, capable of having conversations with foreigners, demanding recognition of the Vietnamese as self-determining and free human beings who are free govern their nation. The condition for such a mutual dialogue is difference between the two parties. Since these intellectuals are mere imitations of the French and the American, they lack the requisite difference to participate in negotiations. Two identical parties do not need dialogues, since they hold the same views. When such similar parties engage in dialogues, Vietnamese interests are absent from the table. Therefore, Vietnamese who have lost their Viet consciousness cannot represent the Vietnamese people in the struggle for national liberation and social revolutions in South Vietnam. Indeed Nguyen Van Trung argued that the French and the Americans should recognize that meaningful negotiation would only be possible with real Vietnamese nationalists: “The colonialists should be lucid enough to refuse their vassals and associate with real nationalists with whom their dialogue is worthy. This lucid decision—the support of the real revolutionists—helps countries that have just gained their liberation. This lucid decision also ensures and secures the colonists’ long-term benefits” (Nguyen 1963, 195).

_Nguyen Van Trung’s Positive Account of Vietnamese Possible Revolutionary Leadership_

The group capable of leading the struggle for national liberation and social revolution must represent the authentic Vietnamese nationalism [cái mình Việt Nam], sharing a keen desire to resistant economic and political dependence and to oppose foreign imposition and occupation. Vietnamese nationalists committed to independence, both in terms of personal and national self-
determination, are the real revolutionary leaders. For Nguyen Van Trung, young scholars, intellectuals, young officials, university and high school students approximated this ideal:

There is a new emerging urban ruling group, but they have not yet become the ruling group. They are young intellectuals, officials or young people, university and high school students. In the next several years, after their graduation or after getting used to with the life style of urban ruling class, they will be corrupted. At this moment, however, they are the group who are most capable to response to the need of the country. They can lead this historical task if and only if they determinedly refuse to follow their former generation’s path, serve working classes and rural people aiming at social equality as a way to liberate their own group and awake nationalist consciousness to be suspicious of neo-colonialisms’ dominating plans and intention. (Nguyen 1970, 50-51)

This new type of nationalist consciousness had the potential to resist all forms of colonization, whether French or American, while also possessing the ability to unite different social classes and groups to struggle for national independence and class equality.

Although Nguyen Van Trung differentiates negative from positive revolutionary leadership, he does not succeed in elaborating a positive account of revolutionary leadership. He touches on this subject only briefly, devoting only half a page to the discussion of young intellectuals, professors, officials, and students as leaders of the revolution. By contrast, his critiques of the incapacity of other social groups’ revolutionary leadership are extensive (Nguyen 197050-51). For example, his article “Từ sự phá sản của các đảng phải quốc gia đến sự phá sản của các tầng lớp trường gia thành thị trong vai trò lãnh đạo cách mạng xã hội trước áp lực thống trị của các chủ nghĩa thực dân”98 spends 50 pages on the negative account of revolutionary leadership while it spends only a half of the last page mentioning the possible revolutionary leaders without any analysis and explanation on why this very specific group can lead the revolution. He also discusses the failure of Vietnamese nationalist consciousness in his book, Chủ nghĩa thực dân Pháp ở Việt Nam: Thực chất và huyền thoại [French Colonialism in Vietnam: Nature and Myths]. Unfortunately, Nguyen Van Trung, a nationalist, cannot overcome
the limits of his own group consciousness. His conception of revolutionary leadership, like his conception of nationalist consciousness, is strong at critique and weak at construction. That is, he does not actually offer an explanatory account of how the possible revolutionary leaders lead the revolution. Without a constructive project, the possible revolutionary leaders only know what and who they want to critique while they do not know what they shall do. Critique, then, becomes the core mode of their existence instead of doing and making life.

Nguyen Van Trung’s analysis of the dialectic of colonizer and the colonized is utopian because it is based on the assumption that the struggle between the oppressor and the oppressed is the struggle for recognition as human beings. From the perspective of the colonized, this assumption is correct. It is not the case from the colonizer’s perspective, however. The colonizer sees himself as a human being by and through dehumanizing the Other. Moreover, he regards himself as a “higher” being—the master—in relation to the colonized. His project is to impose his ideas and standards on the colonized and force the latter to accept his project as the truth. That is, his project is not to be recognized as a human being as equal to the Other. Rather, it aims at being recognized as the master by forcing the Other to accept himself as the slave. From this inaccurate assumption, Nguyen Van Trung’s suggestion that the master should realize that he should respect the Other as a free human being who has the capacity and the right to make personal and national decisions is infeasible and wishful because it skips one important step in the struggle for recognition. To be recognized as a free human being, the Other has to stand up and fight for that recognition. In this case, the Other is the real Vietnamese nationalists—who are not Marxists and not old nationalists but a new generation who has resistant consciousness against American army’s occupation and control. These real Vietnamese nationalists have not struggled to be recognized yet; recognition is only in the form of a pure
consciousness without material expression.\textsuperscript{99} Take Hành trình members as an example. They are what Nguyen Van Trung calls \textit{tăng lớp trường gia Đảng lên}—the rising ruling class. No doubt, they all have national consciousness in the sense that they all resist external forces’ intervention and imposition on Vietnam and appeal to the Vietnamese to make decisions about their own country. They have declared consistently in different volumes of Hành trình, however, that they just offer their own sincere knowledge about the Vietnamese reality. They do not participate in the revolution by and through their actions. What they wrote about the social revolution in South Vietnam showed that they stood up in their consciousness. In terms of their action, however, they had not yet taken a stand. Critical thinking is important but it is not sufficient to construct material power to be recognized as a free human being. A free human being is the one who not only thinks freely but also has material recourses to realize a chosen project. If the new Vietnamese nationalists did not stand up in this full sense—both in thought and by action, then how could Nguyen Van Trung claim that he had freedom to negotiate with the United States. If freedom is understood, as Amartya Kumar Sen suggests, as capacity to actualize one’s project (Sen 1985, 169-221; Sen 1988, 269-294; Sen 2002, 736; Sen 1992, 207),\textsuperscript{100} thinking capacity is not enough for a full freedom. If one does not have material capacity to realize one’s project, then one does not have full freedom because one’s freedom is constrained by physical, psychological, educational, ideological, and material conditions as some socialists and egalitarians hold (Sen 1992, 207; Crocker 1980; Cohen 1988, 317; van Parijs 1995, 330). Absent military strength, how it is possible that the American army would automatically grant recognition as the condition for a dialogue between the two? Nguyen Van Trung’s suggestion is based on a moral ideal standpoint. What one should and ought to do is different from what one does. In this sense, it fails to reflect correctly what actually happens in reality.
Furthermore, it has no real power because it has no method to realize and manifest itself materially. It is a pure idea. Based on an assumption that recognition is an encounter of pure consciousness, Nguyen Van Trung’s view on social revolutionary leadership, therefore, is utopian.101

In contrast to the utopian assumptions of Nguyen Van Trung, the position of Vietnamese Marxist makes a good deal of sense. The Việt Cộng had the most efficient method to realize their humanity. By arming themselves and fighting for independence, they created the material conditions for successful revolution. They actually struggled—on the battlefield and at the negotiating table--for recognition as free human beings. Their struggle forced the colonizer to recognize them as a free people who had the right to govern their country and determine how to use their country’s resources. Neither pure moral ideals nor intellectual appeals secured their recognition. On the contrary, anti-imperialist struggle required intensive military engagement over twenty years that cost nearly seven million lives to force the US to negotiate and to withdraw from Vietnam.

Without material resources and revolutionary leadership, Nguyen Van Trung’s theory of revolution had poor content. It did not offer realistic suggestions to achieve revolutionary transformation. Nonetheless, Nguyen Van Trung’s ideas for social revolution do offer some insights relevant to contemporary Vietnam. He reminds us that revolutions are ongoing projects. To build a just society, Vietnam needs continuing efforts to ensure it attains its social justice objectives. Insights about the challenges posed by outside intervention, including the allure of consumer society and the risks of corruption, are worth considering, but these insights can be enriched by the dynamic materiality—the revolutionary reality that the Vietnamese communists have achieved in the last fifty years.
Vietnamese existential thought that developed in the period from 1954-1975 should be considered in the context of the history of Vietnamese philosophy rather than as a mere imitation of Western existentialism, an imported cultural product from without. Rather than being an unadulterated product of colonialism, it shares thematic continuities with Vietnamese philosophy, such as concern with national independence, liberation, patriotism, and human nature.

In 1993, a group of leading Vietnamese scholars of philosophy led by Nguyen Tai Thu published a comprehensive history of Vietnamese thought. Considered the official chronicle of Vietnamese philosophy, these volumes trace the development of Vietnamese thought from the prehistoric period (2000-1500 BC) to the development of Marxism in Vietnam across the 20th century (Lê and Viên triết học 1991, 86; Lê 1996, 142). In their overview of the history of Vietnamese thought, Vietnamese existential thought from 1954 to 1975 is ignored completely.

Nguyen Tai Thu and Le Sy Thang claim that “In its history, Vietnam has its own philosophy” (Nguyen, Tài Thu’. Lê, Sy Thang and Vien triét hoc 1993, 17). Although Vietnamese philosophy encompasses metaphysics (examination of the relationship between thought and existence, ideas and materiality, and central binaries such as heaven/human [trời - người], form/content [hình - thần], subject/object [tâm - vật], being/nothing [hữu – vô]), and epistemology (formal, informal and dialectical logics), its primary focus has been on social and political issues. As the dominant strand of Vietnamese thought, social and political philosophy have focused on questions of governance, exploring the relationship between social and political
disorder and their remedies [loạn - trĩ], ruler and citizens [vua – tời], and victory and failure [thắng - bài]. Vietnamese moral philosophy has been concerned with conceptions of human nature [bản chất con người], and how to foster moral development [dạo làm người].

Because of the long history of occupation, domination, and oppression by outside forces ranging from China and France to Japan and the United States of America, independence and freedom are the two most important philosophical issues consistently discussed in the history of Vietnamese thought. In the words of Ho Chi Minh, “Nothing is more valuable than independence and freedom” [“Không có gì quí hơn độc lập, tự do”]. The long experiences of domination and struggle for freedom, however, have also ensured that existential problems of anguish, freedom, sociality, and liberation have surfaced recurrently in Vietnamese thought.

According to Tran Van Giau, Nguyen Tai Thu, and Le Sy Thang, another value underlies Vietnamese concern with freedom and national independence. In his influential book, Sự phát triển của tư tưởng ở Việt Nam từ thế kỷ XIX đến Cách mạng Tháng Tám [The Development of Vietnamese Thought from XIX Century to the August Revolution], Tran Van Giau suggests that “The major tradition of our ancestors is the love for the country, is patriotism” (Tran 1973; Nguyễn 1972, 277). From a theoretical perspective, patriotism entails a form of nationalism, recognition of the responsibilities of the Vietnamese community and the people of Vietnam as a united nation. Thus Vietnamese patriotism has generated theories about methods to liberate the country from foreign domination, strategies to regain territory invaded and exploited by foreigners, ways to strengthen the country as a united nation, and the relationship between Vietnam and other nations (Nguyen, Tài Thu’. Lê, Sy Thang and Vien triet hoc 1993, 20). Another aspect of patriotism according to Le Sy Thang in the second volume of History of Vietnamese Thought [Lịch sử tư tưởng Việt Nam] is systematic rejection of anti-nationalists.
Indeed campaigns against anti-nationalists have been a prevailing feature of Vietnamese patriotism since the nineteenth century (Le 1997, 156).

Despite its omission from this major overview of Vietnamese philosophy, I would argue that Vietnamese existentialism during the period from 1954 to 1975 continues to grapple with core themes in Vietnamese philosophy. It is concerned with the questions central to the history of Vietnamese philosophy: independence, freedom, patriotism, and the realization of moral potential. As this chapter has demonstrated, these concerns dominate the works of Vietnamese existential thinkers such as Nguyen Van Trung and Lý Chánh Trung. These thinkers also took strong stands against anti-nationalists and devoted considerable attention to questions concerning how to liberate and strengthen the country.

It is true that the Vietnamese existentialists, Nguyen Van Trung and Lý Chánh Trung, also opposed communism. As a consequence they are typically denounced for their lack of patriotism. Indeed, they have been charged with “anti-national consciousness” \( \text{kế phân dòng} \) and labeled reactionaries. A close examination of their works, especially their later works written after the fall of Diem in 1963 at a time when American troops were increasing their presence in Vietnam, suggests that these existentialists were nationalists. They were consistently concerned with the country’s independence—the core content of “Vietnamese patriotism” \( \text{chủ nghĩa yêu nước Việt Nam} \). Although they argued for a non-communist social revolution in South Vietnam, these thinkers never supported the permanent division of Vietnam into two parts—the North and the South. They argued that South Vietnam should have an opportunity to develop and test its own conception of social revolution. But this conception shared two
key goals with the North-- independence from the US and social equality. As Lý Chánh Trung suggested if the North and the South Vietnam both aim at the same goals, then, eventually, they should converge without fighting even though they embraced different methods of social revolution. Both Nguyen Van Trung and Lý Chánh Trung encouraged the North and the South to stop fighting one another and to work together in the struggle against the occupation of American troops in Vietnam. They also suggested that a non-communist social revolution should depend on the support of the people. It would succeed only if it gained the people’s hearts and minds [đưa vào dân and được lòng dân]. These thinkers endorsed a non-communist social revolution, which did not succeed, but they were Vietnamese nationalists. Nguyen Van Trung argued that an independent Vietnam should not be dependent on communist countries or capitalist countries. Considering both communism and capitalism “invaders,” he opposed the invasions of two sides in “Văn đề chúng ta” [We as Problem], a view that put him at odds with the present Vietnamese government’s commitment to communism.

Beyond their commitments to a particular vision of Vietnamese patriotism and nationalism, the Vietnamese existentialists writing in the period 1954-1975 also shared a dialectical approach to philosophical investigations, a relational conception of the self, and a concern with the harmonization of the self-other relation, features characteristic of Vietnamese traditional philosophy.

Vietnamese existential philosophy should not be considered a mere product of colonialism or a mere imitation of Western existentialism. It should not be excluded from the history of Vietnamese philosophy. It is a reflection upon Vietnamese lived experience by a group of Vietnamese non-communist existential thinkers. Although their way of thinking differs
from official Vietnamese Marxism, their philosophy attempted to make sense of complex social and political developments in Vietnam in a particular socio-historical period. Vietnamese existentialism is one among many different possibilities and different interpretations of Vietnamese social reality that helps us to approximate the truth though it is not the truth.

Conclusion

The central problems, which this study examines, are the one-sided, Eurocentric, narrow, and inaccurate interpretations and assessments of Vietnamese existential thought during the period of 1954-1975. My concern has been to analyze the nature of Vietnamese existential philosophy freed from these prejudices. Contemporary Vietnamese assessments of Vietnamese existential thought are one-sided because they judge Vietnamese existential thought during the period of 1954-1975 from a Marxist approach only. Marxism is considered scientific truth in Vietnam. As correct knowledge that corresponds to the reality it reflects, Marxism is held to be the standard from which to measure all other Vietnamese thought. Non-Marxist schools of thought, particularly existential philosophy, are considered non-scientific, encompassing incorrect knowledge that reflects wrongly the reality of Vietnam, or indeed, “backward knowledge,” which reflects a long surpassed reality tied to colonial Vietnam. When assessed within this Marxist framework, Vietnamese existential thought during the period of 1954-1975 is characterized as Eurocentric and wrong-headed, and condemned to be removed from Vietnamese culture.\textsuperscript{104}
Vietnamese Marxists interpret existentialism to be Eurocentric because they consider existential philosophy a European phenomenon only. Yet ironically, they are also Eurocentric in a different sense. Their core approach and standards of judgment are also drawn from Western philosophy—Marxism. Defining existentialism exclusively in terms of a European body of literature, Vietnamese Marxists conclude that Vietnam does not have a tradition of existential thought. What is called “hiệ̂n sinh Sài Gòn” [Saigon Existentialism] is only a bad imitation of Western existentialism. As an imitation of Western existentialism, Vietnamese existential thought cannot compare with the European standard. For a philosophy concerned with authenticity, any effort to “imitate” its Western origin must necessarily fail. At its best, Vietnamese existential thought is less profound than Western existentialism. At its worst, Vietnamese existential thought “xuyên tặc” [distorts] Western existentialism.

Although Vietnamese existential philosophy in the period from 1954 to 1975 was influenced by European existentialism, I argue that it has different roots, tracing its emergence within Vietnamese history and culture, and exploring its deep connections to Vietnamese Buddhism. Eurocentric views have masked the depth of existential themes within Vietnamese Buddhist texts, suggesting that these texts “reflect” European existential concerns rather than predate European existentialism. I have attempted to excavate those Vietnamese existential roots, situating Vietnamese existentialism in a much longer philosophical tradition. I have also demonstrated that concrete Vietnamese social and political contexts shape Vietnamese existential thinkers’ concerns in ways that differ significantly from the preoccupations of Western existentialism.

Marxist interpretations are narrow because they recognize existential philosophy only as a product of European tradition. They fail to grasp the diversity of existential philosophies based
on the diversity of lived experiences rooted in social, political, and cultural contexts of various races, countries and continents. This narrowness leads to a fixed view of existential topics based on the views articulated by Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Sartre, Jaspers, Marcel and other male Western existentialists. Even the famous Western woman existentialist, Simone de Beauvoir, whose work theorized women’s lived experience, was omitted from this narrow catalogue of existentialism. Similarly, the texts written by the Frantz Fanon, the existential thinker who theorized French colonization in the context of the French Antilles and Algeria, are not discussed by this narrow view. Thus the narrow view misses other important existential topics articulated by white-women, non-white and non-European thinkers such as problems of domination, dehumanization, dependence, independence, revolution, racism, self-other, recognition, sexism, and cultural alienation. These diverse traditions of existential thought have much in common with the theorizations of Vietnamese intellectuals, who also experienced the dehumanizing dynamics of French colonialism and American imperialism.

This narrow view sets up a rigid definition of what constitutes an existential work, whether philosophical or literary. Feelings of anguish, despair, loneliness, and social withdrawal are typically designated existential topics. Vietnamese philosophical and literary works that address these themes are classified as Vietnamese existentialism. The narrow view misses other equally important existential themes, however, which engage social, political, and cultural and moral phenomena. With the exception of except for that of Lê Kim Châu, Marxist interpretations of Vietnamese existential thought do not examine social and political works published by the journal Hành trình—a journal closely associated with three South Vietnamese existential thinkers, Nguyễn Văn Trung, Lý Chánh Trung, and Trần Văn Toàn. These existential thinkers published extensively in Hành trình, addressing issues such as self-other recognition,
war, peace, revolution, democracy, equality, colonialism, and independence, issues grounded in Vietnamese existential encounters in everyday life. Nguyễn Văn Trung (Nguyen 1990; Nguyen 1970, 186) and Lý Chánh Trung were heavily influenced by both Marxist existentialism and Marxism, and Trần Văn Toàn (Tran 1965, 160; Tran 1965, 209; Tran 1965, 290; Tran 1967) was an expert on Marx’s social and political philosophy. The complex interplay of Marxism and existentialism in Vietnamese existential thought from 1954 to 1975 is neglected by most Marxist interpretations. One-sided, Eurocentric, and narrow, these interpretations are markedly inaccurate. They omit from the canon of Vietnamese existentialism, the most important and serious works of the genre by Thích Nhất Hạnh, Nguyen Van Trung, and Lý Chánh Trung.

In addition, these Marxist assessments fail to situate texts written by Vietnamese existential thinkers in their historical contexts either in relation to Vietnamese cultural and philosophical traditions or in relation to concrete social, political, and cultural contexts of Vietnam during French and American occupation. For example, if one read Nguyen Van Trung’s texts carefully, one discovers that Nguyen Van Trung’s philosophy develops through at least two periods. The early Nguyen Van Trung writing before the fall of Diem regime in 1963 introduced ideas drawn from Sartre’s literary and philosophical writings, such as *Nausea* and *Being and Nothingness*. In this early period, Nguyen Van Trung tended to introduce Sartre’s ontological ideas in an abstract form, concerned primarily with ontology. The later Nguyen Van Trung writing after the fall of Diem regime was especially interested in Sartre’s social and political philosophy manifested in *Search for a Method* and some parts of *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. The later Nguyen Van Trung also drew heavily from French Antillean existential thinker Frantz Fanon, particularly *The Wretched of the Earth*. The influence of Sartre and Fanon combined with changing dynamics of the American War and the decadent social structure of
South Vietnam changed Nguyen Van Trung’s philosophical priorities from ontology to social and political philosophy. His concerns with war, peace, independence, and social revolution, his critiques of South Vietnamese social structure and American imperialism reflect the clear influence of Fanon. As Nguyen Van Trung put it, he experienced “a profound turning point from a meditative attitude to a more politically engaged philosophy” [thái độ thường ngoạn đến giải đoạn chính trị với thái độ dân thân] (Nguyen 1969, 236).

Assessments of Vietnamese existential philosophy that emphasize quietism and abstractness are inaccurate. They freeze existentialism in the period of the early Sartre, writing *Being and Nothingness*, and the early Nguyen Van Trung. Judgments from one specific work or period were generalized to all existentialism, missing the dialectical development of existential thought. In this way, a moment was mistakenly absolutized and turned into a movement. To challenge this impoverished interpretation of Vietnamese existential thought, I have drawn heavily from work published in the journal *Hành trình* throughout this study.

As a Vietnamese scholar, I have sought to challenge the understanding of existential philosophy exclusively in terms of European literature. Reflecting upon Vietnamese philosophy from within the culture, I have extended the understanding of existential thought to include existential questions raised by the lived experiences of Vietnam. If existential philosophy is understood as reflection upon lived experience within specific cultural, social, and political contexts, there is no longer a need for non-European countries to try to “keep up” with European existential philosophy. Instead, non-Western countries such as Vietnam, may develop their own theories engaging practical issues raised by lived experience. By undertaking this challenge, my study contributes to the field of existential philosophy, offering an analysis and an interpretation of concrete and contextualized set of existential questions and issues that concern the
Vietnamese. In that sense, my study articulates a Vietnamese perspective for consideration by the philosophical world broadly construed.

While the first chapter of this study aims at correcting the mistaken Eurocentric approach to Vietnamese existential thought, the remainder of the dissertation offers a new construction of Vietnamese existential philosophy. I examine prominent existential themes in Vietnamese Buddhist and non-Buddhist scholars and thinkers concerning the nature of the self, self-other relations, and the possibilities for self-actualization. I explore a relational conception of the self unique to Vietnamese thought and trace existential thinkers’ movement from an analysis of the social constitution of the self to an analysis of the structure of Vietnamese society.

Analyzing Vietnamese society in a period of crisis, each Vietnamese Buddhist thinker articulated the crisis from a different perspective. Thích Minh Chau and Thích Duc Nhuan argued that the Vietnamese were enslaved by certain ideological constructions of science, religion, language, and philosophy, and by social institutions that failed to recognize that the human being is the center and the ultimate end of existence. Similarly, the Vietnamese Zen Buddhist poet Thích Nhật Hạnh faulted Vietnamese society for mistaking a half-truth for the truth, for mistaking one conception of existence for existence itself. This epistemic closure, he argued, was the source of conflict among different Vietnamese social groups and classes. Từ .TextEdit characterized the crisis Vietnam was encountering as alienation—resulting from a failure to confront dialectical contradictions. “Falling” into a moment rather than embracing dialectical movement, the Vietnamese fixated on material objects, were imprisoned by particular “idols,” took refuge in absolute freedom in the forms of nirvana, art for art sake, and abstract philosophy divorced from living existence. Although they addressed different aspects of the crisis, the Vietnamese Buddhist scholars shared a common observation, criticizing their peers for
absolutizing one moment and losing sight of the larger dialectical movement. By objectifying one moment as the only truth, the standard governing individuals’ ways of thinking, acting, and being in the world became ossified. As a consequence, individuals fell prey to domination by external forces, whether those forces were material objects, theories, ideologies, or alien social structures. Emphasizing the epistemological source of the crisis facing the Vietnamese, Buddhist thinkers attributed the problem to profound ignorance. Defining the source of human enslavement as ignorance, they prescribed enlightenment as the means of liberation from these pitfalls. Buddhist dialectical logic and meditation were identified as two ways to liberate consciousness from epistemic closure—to release one moment to the whole movement. Buddhist dialectical logic teaches one to think openly, recognizing each point of view as a relative truth (as opposed to the truth), constantly negating a particular view as the only truth, and incorporating different views into one’s horizon. Insisting that truth is a progression only approximated by limited perspectives, Buddhists also endorse meditation to release the mind from attachment to a particular moment. Meditation situates a specific object of cognition in its full horizon, in the unity of presence and absence, past, present, and future, body and mind. It facilitates a grasp of the whole present social and environmental network in relation to past history and to questions of life and death.

Vietnamese non-Buddhist existential thinkers such as Nguyen Van Trung and Lý Chánh Trung offered a different diagnosis of the constraints circumscribing the Vietnamese. Advancing a structural account of violence, they argued that class division tied to private ownership of the means of production and unequal distribution of burdens and benefits contributed to dehumanization and injustice.106 As a violent society, South Vietnam tolerated a huge gap between a small rich elite and an increasingly immiserated populace. Colonized by the United
States of America, this violent social structure necessitated a social revolution in South Vietnam to ensure that food, clothing, dignity, independence, equality, and democracy became available for the Vietnamese people.

Like the Buddhist existentialists, however, the non-Buddhist thinkers also located revolution in the voluntary acts of individual consciousness. Revolutionizing oneself was the starting point from which to make a social revolution. Thus Vietnamese existentialism is best categorized as a form of existential humanism. Taking the individual as the source of all social value and all possibilities for change, they lodge responsibility for social revolution in the consciousness and free choice of each individual agent.

Vietnamese Buddhist and non-Buddhist existential thinkers complement one another, offering accounts of oppression that range from epistemic closure to structures of social and political violence. While the Buddhist existential thinkers highlight epistemic solutions to the question, “what I should do given the condition I was born into and live in,” the non-Buddhist Vietnamese existential thinkers emphasize the importance of social and political action, advancing a theory of non-Communist social revolution. Vietnamese Buddhist existential thinkers were also concerned with social and political change. Thích Nhất Hạnh, for example, became an activist in the struggle for peace and independence for South Vietnam. Advancing a theory of death as social change, Vietnamese Buddhist activists devised a distinctive mode of political action. Self-immolation for a political cause embodied a unity between thought and action, philosophy and practice, a choice of dematerialization to promote the nation’s political interests. In a sense, then, Vietnamese Buddhist and non-Buddhist existential thinkers converged. They shared a conception of philosophy as reflection upon lived experience that
helps human beings to act and to actualize their projects in order to become authentic selves regardless of the constraints upon their existence.

This study advances a new approach to Vietnamese existential philosophy, offering a new interpretation of the nature and contents of Vietnamese existentialism. As the first extensive study of Vietnamese existential thought freed from Eurocentrism, it argues that a very specific branch of Vietnamese Buddhism—Thích Nhất Hạnh’s version—is a form of existential philosophy in its full sense. Breaking with the view that Vietnamese Buddhism is a form of quietism that seeks escape through the pursuit of nirvana, a charge advanced by well-known Western philosophers such as Simone de Beauvoir (1948 (1976), 7-8) and Hazel Barnes (1967, 221-280), my study offers a new reading and radical reinterpretation of Vietnamese Buddhism. This conception of Vietnamese Buddhist existentialism has much to offer individuals living in an age of globalization, for it requires each individual to be active and responsible for him/herself, and for the social and environmental network in which s/he lives.

Situating Vietnamese existential philosophy from the period 1954 to 1975 within the larger Vietnamese philosophical tradition, I have been able to demonstrate common features. Vietnamese existential philosophy is not an illegitimate child of the Vietnamese philosophical tradition as so often suggested. On the contrary, it manifests clear continuities with the Vietnamese philosophical tradition. As a philosophical anthropology, Vietnamese existential philosophy is best understood as a form of humanism. The individual human being is considered the source of all values and the highest goal. Yet the Vietnamese conception of the self considers the Other a necessary structure of the self, arguing both for mutual constitution and mutual recognition of free subjects. Like Vietnamese Marxism, Vietnamese existential thought endorses a unity between theory and practice, suggesting that philosophy not only explains but
also changes the world through human action. It recognizes individuals as the prime historical agents, while situating individual freedom of choice within objective conditions that structure but never determine the individual action. Like a much older tradition of Vietnamese philosophy, Vietnamese existentialism is dialectical, positing a movement toward harmonization—the harmony of Self-Other, individuals-society, and nation-nation through dialogue and mutual understanding.

This study not only relocates Vietnamese existential philosophy (1954-1975) within the Vietnamese philosophical tradition but also suggests that Vietnamese existentialism is relevant to contemporary Vietnam. Vietnamese Buddhist existential philosophy advances a view of the non substantial self that challenges fixed notions of permanent identity. As a movement of dynamic fluidity, identity emerges through constant change in a shifting world of increasingly global cultural exchange. Within the flow of life, each individual is constantly changing and responsible for changes chosen. The standpoint of emptiness acknowledges a world of diversity, encourages perception that embraces many different perspectives and is open to equal validity of different perspectives. Taking practice and lived experience as unifying principles, existential thinking avoids dogmatism and idealism. Thus Vietnamese existentialism suggests a new “transversal” way of seeing the world. In the words of Hwa Yol Jung (2009, 15), transversality means “to overcome and go beyond (trans) the clash of ethnocentrism both “Orientalist” and “Occidentalist.”…It breaks through bipolarity itself…Transversality is the paradigmatic way of overcoming all polarizing dichotomies.”

Buddhist existential thought offers great value in a world of increasing cultural contact and exchange for they embrace other points of view as unexhausted possibilities for modern life. Refusing to impose any point of view, they reject intellectual domination and in so doing, reject
relationships of master and slave, strong and weak, superior and inferior. Indeed, they insist that opposing views meet at a common place—the standpoint of absolute nothingness, a place of harmonization in the world of multiplicities. Adopting absolute emptiness as a method, Buddhist existentialists take all views as aspects of reality. Their goal is to know as many aspects of reality as possible in order to capture the world’s suchness. They do not seek to impose the power or authority of one perspective on others. This philosophy has much to commend it as a guide to interpersonal relations and as a guide to the relationship between humans and the natural world.

Vietnamese non-Buddhist moral and political existential thought from the period 1954 to 1975 also offers insights for problems pertaining to “Đổi mới” [economic restructuring]. As capitalism is reintroduced into socialist Vietnam, the nation should never lose sight of morality as its central and highest goal. Vietnamese policies should continue to reflect the interests of the working classes and the poor, aiming to reduce the gap between the rich and the poor, cities and rural areas. Offering equal opportunities for the poor, especially in education and in public participation in important national decisions is particularly challenging as capitalist wage structures increase inequalities. Vietnamese existentialists sought non-violent methods to realize their goals, while pledging to respect individual rights and interests. They constructed a political agenda concerned with citizens’ freedom and democratic social structures that aim at social justice and the public good. In the context of globalization, Nguyen Van Trung’s critique of imperialism remains cogent, as does his critique of corrupt elites and urban dwellers. As globalization reintroduces to Vietnam transnational companies run by foreigners in almost every aspect of the economy and in education, the Vietnamese must once again grapple with questions of national identity and culture. As the Vietnamese compete with economically “stronger”
foreigners within their own borders, policy makers must design mechanisms to protect and
enrich Vietnamese culture and the Vietnamese economic capacities. Issues of equality, justice
among the Vietnamese, and global justice between Vietnam and other nations, are once again
pressing concerns for the Vietnamese. Examining Vietnamese existential thought is one way to
encourage the Vietnamese to think critically about the contours of a just and democratic society
and the best means to realize such a society in contemporary Vietnam. By exploring Vietnamese
existential thinkers, this study brings together Vietnamese and Western philosophical traditions
while respecting their diversity. Thus, it makes a contribution to the development of cross-
cultural and inclusive philosophy in a global era.
NOTES

1 Hành trình is the name of the journal edited by Nguyen Van Trung that was published in 1963 in Saigon. The group of writers and thinkers who contributed articles to this journal is called the Hành trình group.


3 I shall discuss this point latter in Chapter Two.

4 Located in central Vietnam. It was the capital of Vietnam during the Nguyễn Dynasty.

5 Văn Đàn, Creation, Modernity, the Twentieth Century are Vietnamese journals and newspapers that were published in Saigon before 1975.

6 This feature of Nguyen Van Trung’s reading of Western existentialism deeply influenced his students, who later became prominent existentialist writers, especially the woman writer Nguyễn Thị Hoàng who wrote over two dozen novels with existentialist themes.

7 The later Nguyen Van Trung will be examined in the chapter on “What Should I do? On Revolution”.


9 I realize that there is an interesting familiarity and influence between Vietnamese critics, writers, and poets who influenced by Buddhism and Heidegger’s and Nietzsche’s existential philosophies. I defer a discussion of this branch of Vietnamese existential thinking and of a comparative section between Vietnamese Buddhism and Heidegger’s existential philosophy.

10 I defer a discussion of the contribution of 1954-1975 Vietnamese existentialism to conceptions of the inward life and the sexual G51 body to a future project.

11 I thank Lewis Gordon for this point.
I discuss the problems of Losing-consciousness-of-Vietnamese-origins and identity shortly in chapter on "Who Am I? Lý Chánh Trung on the Self and the Other".

See Lê Kim Châu’s PhD. dissertation “Chủ nghĩa Hiện sinh và một vài ảnh hưởng của nó ở Miền Nam Việt Nam” [Existentialism and its Influence in South Vietnam], Hà Nội, 1996, pp. 107-112. In the dissertation, Lê Kim Châu spent 5 pages discussing the works written by Nguyen Van Trung and Lý Chánh Trung published by Hành trình under the section entitled “Chủ nghĩa hiện sinh với lập trường chính trị của một số trí thức miền Nam” [Existentialism and Several South Vietnamese Intellectuals’ Political Standpoint]. Though examining Nguyen Van Trung’s and Lý Chánh Trung’s works, Lê Kim Châu’s goal is to prove that Nguyen Van Trung and Lý Chánh Trung’s idea on a non-communist social revolution was imported from Sartre and other Western existentialists, which is rooted in Lê Kim Châu’s Eurocentric leading research question “on Existentialism in South Vietnam, we think there are two aspects that need to be clarified: first, the import and second, the influence [Về chủ nghĩa hiện sinh ở Miền Nam, theo chúng tôi có hai phương diện cần làm rõ: thứ nhất là quá trình du nhập, thứ hai là những ảnh hưởng] [italic added] (p. 7). Clearly, Vietnamese existential thought in South Vietnam is seeing as the import of and influence by the European existentialism. In addition, Lê Kim Châu’s inaccurate judgment that Nguyen Van Trung wanted to depend on the US.’s aid program to implement such a social revolution (Le Kim Chau, p. 110) is not what Nguyen Van Trung suggested. Nguyen Van Trung does not reject financial aid programs but he clearly rejects the United States of America’s aid program because it leaded to a colonial social structure of South Vietnam. I already discussed this issue in the chapter “What Should I Do? On Revolution”.

I thank Kristin Gjesdal for this point.

Sunya is a Sanskrit word used in Buddhism meaning “void” (i.e., devoid of any particular point of view).

I shall Buddhist Tetralemma logic in Chapter Two.

I defer a discussion of this branch of Vietnamese existentialism, which directs toward the inward life, to a future project.

I must defer a study of existentialist texts written by women Vietnamese writers to a future study.

Quietist view on "no-mind" or emptiness holds that it is a state of mind that is absent of all contents (e.g., emotions, desire, will, and thoughts)

Thích Nhất Hạnh never accepts that he is an existentialist.

I thank Philip Alperson for his suggestion to distinguish naïve and sophisticated understandings of Buddhism.
22 My translation.

23 This does not mean the human being has a full realization of freedom but rather that human beings are in the fluid process of achieving freedom.

24 Not be determined does not mean that one is not influenced by external context. Rather, it means that external situations cannot determine one’s project of freedom and one’s pursuit of freedom. This statement argues for the role of subjectivity in the course of liberation.

25 See Sartre’s *The Transcendence of the Ego*.

26 The Vietnamese Buddhist scholar Thich Duc Nhuan also argues that Buddhism can go beyond Western existentialism because the latter ends up with despair and the former can help men to be calm facing the pull between constraint world and freedom of mind.

27 I would like to thank Kristin Gjesdal for this point.

28 For a short introduction to different types of meditations and how they work, see Peter Harvey, pp. 244-279.

29 As quoted by Thích Nhất Hạnh, *No Death, No Fear*, p. 35.

30 I thank Kristin Gjesdal for this point.

31 As understood by Kantian philosophy.

32 Vietnamese Buddhist theory of human self is different from that of Marxist teaching in the context of contemporary Vietnam. Though Vietnamese Marxism recognizes the influence of human consciousness to material world [ý thức tác động trở lại vật chất], the prevailing Marxist view is that material conditions determine human consciousness [vật chất quyết định ý thức.]

33 I would like to thank Mary Hawkesworth for her suggestion that I examine the Vietnamese view of the self as relational.

34 For a French perspective on Vietnamese culture of ancestor worship, see Pierre Varet, part II “au crépuscule des Dieux” in the book *Au pays d’An-nam, Les Dieux qui meurent* [Ở xứ An-nam Những thần linh sắp chết], Paris 1932. In this book, though Varet’s aim is to address the convergence between Vietnamese culture “cité jaune” and ancient European society “cité antique” to set a cultural foundation for the French myths in colonizing Vietnam, he realizes that the dead always is with the alive Vietnamese and that the dead is still alive. That is why the dead still need to be fed and dressed, which express in the Vietnamese culture of ancestor worship. For a discussion on Varet’s view from Vietnamese perspective, see Nguyen Van Trung, *Chủ nghĩa thực dân Pháp ở Việt Nam: Thực chất và huyền thoại* [French Colonialism in Vietnam: Fact and Myths], pp. 159-161.

35 I thank Professor Bùi Thanh Quất at the University of Hanoi for his discussion of this saying.

36 See Peter Harvey, pp. 49-50.
Liberation has different meanings. Nguyen Van Trung in *the Dialectic of Liberation in Buddhism* sees liberation only from its religious aspect: liberation from suffering because of attachment to desire. Destroying desires is the way to be free from mental and psychological suffering. The Vietnamese Buddhists extended the religious meaning of liberation to a more social and political meaning. In their works, liberation actually is the act of changing the present situation of Vietnam: the War and corruption committed by governmental leaders in South Vietnam (Minh Chau 1969, 1970, 29-32).

The term is borrowed from Lewis Gordon's *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man*.

He is the editor and the main writer for the journal *Vạn Hạnh*.

He used to be the general secretary of the journal *Vạn Hạnh*. See Tam Ích, *Sartre và Heidegger trên thảm xanh* [Sartre and Heidegger on the Green Mat] (Sài Gòn: Hồng Đức, 1969) 132.


See Peter Harvey, p. 273.

I borrow "Virgin Spring" from Ingmar Bergman's film *Virgin Spring*.

Thich Quang Duc's self-immolation is recorded in Ingmar Bergman's *Persona*.

When he talks about the open morality in *Revolution and Morality*, he mentions Bergson’s Les 2 Sources de la religion in a footnote on page 10.

Though Lý Chánh Trung deploys the concept human nature, he does not mean that man has a fixed human nature. Rather, man defines his human nature in the process of articulating his moral ideal and objectifying his moral ideal in the reality by and through material activities.

"Nếu cái “triển dịch” là 1 cái gì tất yếu, nhất thiết phải xây ra như vậy, thì không còn vấn đề đạo đức. Só dĩ có vấn đề đạo đức, có 1 “con đường” thành nhân, là vì con người không nhất thiết thành người.

Và nếu con người không nhất thiết thành người, 1 cách “tự nhiên” thì phải quan niệm nhân tính không phải như 1 định luật tất yếu mà như 1 định nghĩa mà con người phải tìm cho chính mình. Cái “thiên menh,” chỉ là những điều kiện vật chất và tình thần mà tạo hóa đã phù cho nhân loại và cho riêng tôi. Đưa vào những điều kiện đó, tôi phải tìm cho tôi 1 định nghĩa.” (p. 14)
50 “con người chỉ là người khi còn biết hướng về một lý tưởng đạo đức. Và một lý tưởng đạo đức chỉ có thể là một lý tưởng siêng việt. Vì nó siêng việt nó mới thúc đẩy con người hướng thượng, tiến tới, vượt khỏi cái bàn thân bề bông của mình. Vì nó siêng việt nó mới là cái mẫu mực đúng để đánh giá hành vi con người trong những hoàn cảnh luôn luôn biến chuyển.” (p. 113)

51 “Tự do thật sự là chấp nhận tất cả những dự kiến của nội giới và ngoài giới. Chấp nhận không phải là đầu hàng, từng phục những dự kiến này như một định mệnh, mà chấp nhận để biến chúng thành những điều kiện từ đó tôi mới có thể tự tạo nên tôi. Nó cách khác, tự do thật sự là biến cái số mệnh (destin) thành cái vận mệnh (destinée) hay dùng hơn nữa, thành cái sự mệnh (vocation).” (p. 24)

52 See Lý Chánh Trung, Revolution and Morality, p. 23.

53 I translate what Lý Chánh Trung considers “tất định” [déterminisme] as the given based on the meaning of the word he actually uses in this context. By the “tất định” [déterminisme], Lý Chánh Trung means the already established conditions that one was born into and finds one has them as a part of one life that one cannot refuse.

54 “Tôi bị bao quanh bởi những Tất định (déterminisme) từ những Tất định của nội tâm đến những Tất định xã hội và những Tất định thiên nhiên. Tự do không phải là phụ nhận những Tất định mà là đưa trên những Tất định để chính phục lấy mình và giải phóng lấy mình.” (p. 24)

55 On this point, Lý Chánh Trung mentions G. Marcel’s disposer réelement de ce qui me perment de disposer des choses. See Revolution and Morality, pp. 16, 19.

56 Lý Chánh Trung quotes Beauvoir’s Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté, NRF., p. 15.

57 On this point, Lý Chánh Trung mentions Karl Jaspers. For detail, see Lý Chánh Trung, Revolution and Morality, p. 21.

58 A perfect being as Beauvoir said early is a God: “an exact co-incidence with himself”. A God does not need any morality whatsoever.

59 “Như vậy có thể luận rằng: tôi là một ý thức và một tự do. Tự do đầu là tôi” khi tôi ý thức về tôi như một hiện thể hướng về một hiện thể, tức lpf như một tự do tự lựa chọn lấy mình để tự tạo ra mình.” (p. 24)

60 “… nhìn thấy cái tôi lý tưởng, trả lời tiếng gọi của sự mệnh là dân thân vào một cuộc phiêu lưu mà không bao giờ chắc chắn sẽ “thành công”. Cái tôi lý tưởng hiện ra trước mặt tôi như một chăn trải kề gọi tôi tiến bước. Nó chỉ tự bỏ lỡ dân theo mỗi bước tôi đi.”


… Cả hai người, người tốt cũng như người xấu, đều là thấy ta.

… Cái “tốt” cũng như cái “xấu” nơi thán nhân không phải là một ý niệm trừ tượng mà tôi có thể rút ra từ hành động của thán nhân, mà là những khả hưu của chính tôi: tôi cảm thấy có thể trở thành cái tốt hay cái xấu đó với thán nhân kia hoặc kẻ sát nhân này.” (pp. 36-37)

See Revolution and Morality, especially in the section on “Tinh thần đổi thoại” [The Spirit of dialogue], pp. 41-50.

Lý Chánh Trung brings the Indian hero Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948) repeatedly into not only his early book Revolution and Morality published in 1960 but also in many other articles published by the journal Hành trình after the fall of Diem regime in 1963. These texts discuss how the Vietnamese can realize a social revolution that is at the same time moral through analyzing the dialectic of revolutionary goal and its means. Lý Chánh Trung admires Gandhi’s non-violent revolution. Lý Chánh Trung considers Gandhi’s non-violent revolution the ideal for the South Vietnamese revolutionary project. However, Lý Chánh Trung consistently confirms that the Vietnamese cannot imitate what Gandhi and the Indian did because the two countries have different conditions. Therefore, the Vietnamese must be innovative in finding its own techniques or means to realize its end—a non-violent social revolution. In this case, we can say two things. First and more generally in term of the relation between goals and means, the self is different from the Other because of the self’ means to reach the share goals or vocation between the Other and the self. Lý Chánh Trung brings a specific case to justify his claim that methods define the particular while goal defines the universal. Gandhi’s non-violent revolution as Gandhi’s vocation is inspired by Indian ancient texts, Christ’ lecture on the mountain, and Ruskin’s book. However, Gandhi’s methods make his a different person than the ideals he inspired Chánh Trung Lý, Cách mạng và Đạo đức [Revolution and Morality], p.34. More personally, Lý Chánh Trung himself realizes his ideal self in Gandhi and Gandhi’s vocation. Gandhi’s vocation is transmitted to Lý Chánh Trung and turns to be the latter’s own vocation as the most general end—the finality. However, “the how” or the techniques to get there—the highest end—offered by Lý Chánh Trung is different from that of Gandhi, which we shall discuss shortly. In this sense, the techniques or means define and articulate the unique way the self is in the world in relation to its Other while the self is directed itself to its Other as its goal. By arguing for the particular defined by methods or actions, Lý Chánh Trung already appreciates the diversity of methods and means in reaching one goal—the universal.

I shall discuss these questions shortly.

The Vietnamese existential thinker Trần Thái Đình, for example, received his Ph.D. degree in Philosophy in Belgium.
Nguyễn Văn Khuê is a private high school located in Trà Vinh province—204 km from Sài Gòn—run by a Vietnamese Nguyễn Văn Khuê who attained a bachelor degree from France.

“Nơi đây không có những phân chia tế nhị mà chỉ có rác rưởi một hàng học sinh An-Nam, cùng chung một số phần và một nghiệp sống chúng tôi sống trong cái thế giới An-Nam đó như cái trong nước, không tự tôn mà cùng chẳng tự tị; chúng tôi là chúng tôi, thế thôi.


Taberd is one of the largest French high schools in Indochina. See Lý Chánh Trung, *Returning to the Nation*, p. 21.

The former name of Vietnam.

By saying living in Hue, Lý Chánh Trung means that while be surrounded by Vietnamese tradition and the Vietnamese, his consciousness was more Westernized.

I thank Lewis Gordon for this point.

In 1966 Lý Chánh Trung wrote this memoir.

I thank Lewis Gordon for this point that I have learned from his lectures from the course African Existentialism delivered during the fall 2008 at Temple University. He addressed the impossibility of the idea that some African Americans attempt to identify with the white in a racist society.


Though Lý Chánh Trung has not defined what humanity is, by reading through his works, I think that we can deploy the concept humanity to describe Lý Chánh Trung’s moral ideal.

Published in *Hành trình*, volume 6, 1965, pp. 23-40.

By the time Lý Chánh Trung wrote this article, South Vietnam is independent from the North so it was possible for the South to seek for its ideal self. The harder question would be whether the South Vietnamese government would support Lý Chánh Trung’s suggestion of an ideal self for the South. I shall discuss Lý Chánh Trung’s ideal self for the South shortly.

Before doing so, I would like to note readers that after *Revolution and Morality* (1960), Lý Chánh Trung has not worked out sufficient concepts of the ideal self and the Other. Instead, he applied the concepts of the ideal Self and the Other he already understood in *Revolution and Morality* into a new social and political context of Vietnam after the fall of Diem regime in 1963. The application of such concepts into a new social and political context causes holes and a gap between theory and practical suggestions. His writings after *Revolution and Morality* much less conceptual and much more informative and practical in the sense that they deal with political
suggestions rather than conceptual development such as the development of the concepts of the Self, its ideal self, and the Other. I am in sympathy with this limit because during warring periods, as Nguyen Van Trung correctly observes in *Ca tung thân xác* [In praise of the Body] that Vietnamese intellectuals did not have the luxury of time and material conditions to think deeply and conceptually and to develop splendid theories but were pulled to most critical and practical issues such as war, peace, revolution, independence, life, and death that the nation was facing. I clearly understand that the conceptual development is Lý Chánh Trung’s younger generations’ philosophical task.

80 Published in *Hành trình*, volume 2 (1964), pp. 18-24.

81 “Và cách mạng bản thân là đạm từ bất tất cả, sòng nghèo với người nghèo để cùng với người nghèo thực hiện cuộc cách mạng của người nghèo.” (p. 23)

82 My analysis of this point is influenced by Husserl’s view on “horizon”, the present and the absent and Sartre’s view on the absent in both *Being and Time* and *Search for a Method*. In *Cartesian Meditation*, Husserl writes: “There belongs to every genuine perception its reference from the “genuinely perceived” sides of the object of perception to the sides “also meant”—not yet perceived but anticipated” (§ 19, 44). Dermot Moran’s analysis of Husserl’s horizon is very helpful. For further analysis, see Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 558.

83 This article was first published by *Hành trình*, volume 7-8 (1965) pp. 1-15. Later, it appears in Nguyen Van Trung’s Nhan dinh [Assessments], volume IV.

84 “Chính phủ quốc gia ở Việt Nam dù có tuyên bố gì đi nữa, chưa chắc đã được hội ý kiến, còn nói gì đến quyền được quyết định những mưu toan mặc cả, đôi chóc thường lương về Việt Nam ở Hoa Thịnh Đốn, Luân Đốn, Mạc Tư Khoa, Hà Nội…” (p. 100)

85 “Nhưng đây là điều không thể được, vì người Mỹ sang dạy chú yếu là vì quyền lợi của họ, và chỉ muốn Việt Nam nắm trong khu vực phát triễn văn ảnh hưởng của Mỹ, nghĩa là trở thành một thuộc địa kiểu mới mà thôi.” (p. 104-105).

86 The respect for diversity of political projects later is argued in “Cách mạng để tiến tới hòa bình” published in *Hành trình*, volume 6, 1965, pp. 23-40. In this article, Lý Chánh Trung assumes that (1) the North and the South Vietnam have different political means to achieve the revolutionary goals such as food, cloth, equality, dignity, freedom, and democracy; (2) the South’s politics should be accepted; (3) because all Vietnamese people thought they hold different political views, they should have right to live in Vietnam; (4) South Vietnam’s idea for a non-communist revolution should be given an opportunity to test itself in a revolutionary competition with the North to aim at the unity of the whole country if the two sides both aim at the same goals for the people.
In *Search for a Method*, Sartre devotes one chapter entitled “The Problem of Mediations and Auxiliary Disciplines” to discuss how frozen Marxism fails to see different types of mediations that are needed to fill in Marxist abstract schemata. For detail, see pp. 35-84.

In the article *Revolution to Peace*, Lý Chánh Trung offers his view on a possible revolution in South Vietnam as if it could possibly take place. The possible reason, I think, is that by the time this article was written, the reality of South Vietnam pushed responsible Vietnamese intellectuals to think about solutions for the South. As an intellectual, Lý Chánh Trung believed that such a revolution could be one way to a peaceful unity of the North and the South rather than the extension of the War to define which side would lead the country. However, earlier in *Revolution and Morality* (1960) when Diem was still in power, the War was not actually taken place in the country so as the need to offer a way out of the War was less immediate than after 1963. This may explain why by 1960 Lý Chánh Trung did not believe that a moral revolution could be realized in South Vietnam in its present situation after 9 years reform’s failure and in its present warring time. In the Preface of this book, Lý Chánh Trung writes: “In South Vietnam, after the illusionary years, I do not believe that such a revolution is a possibility at all, especially in the War regardless the revolutionary leaders’ schools of thought. However, the War will end some day in one or other way.

That day, the issue of revolution will be discussed much more seriously and immediately than this present time, and revolution must be resolved in one or other way.” (*Revolution and Morality*: Preface, p. 8).

A poor government does not mean that the government should not have national budget. Rather, it means governmental, party leaders, statesmen, stateswomen, and leading governmental officials are not rich and should not be so rich unreasonably by what they are doing for the country. That is, as revolutionary people, corruption must be avoided and forbidden.

Lý Chánh Trung discusses this issue in *Revolution and Morality*.

At the APA 2008 annual meeting held in Marriot Hotel in Philadelphia, the Singaporean scholar A.T. Nuyen (National University of Singapore) in his paper “Rethinking Some Biomedical Issues Through Confucian Role-Based Ethics” presented on Sunday Evening December 28th, 2008 argues for a pure ethical role-based ethics while he seems to fail to recognize the complementary function of a right-based theory. A role-based ethics as such
assumes a *successful* fulfillment of individual moral roles and works only if this assumption is met while does not consider another possibility—the case that the individual *fails* to fulfill her or his moral roles.

If the individual does not have a proper thinking capacity, the social organization or group the individual belongs to (e.g., the individual’s family or that of her or his community) is legally responsible for the individual and her or his actions that affect the public good.

I thank Mary Hawkesworth for challenging me to think more about the concept of freedom and the distinction between negative and positive freedom.


For detailed discussion on Vietnamese intellectuals, see the section on “The Dialectic of Vietnamese-original-losing-consciousness”.

Published by *Hành trình* and later was included in *Assessment*, volume IV (1970), pp. 1-51.

My analysis is shed light by Hegelian view on “Self-consciousness” in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, pp. 104-138.


In his dissertation “Chủ nghĩa Hiện sinh và một vài ảnh hưởng của nó ở miền Nam Việt Nam”, Le Kim Chau criticizes that Nguyen Van Trung’s non-communist social revolution is utopian because the latter wanted to receive financial aid from the United State of America to implement such a revolution. In this sense, my critique of Nguyen Van Trung’s utopia is different from that of Le Kim Chau. Somewhere else, I already addressed earlier that Nguyen Van Trung distinguishes two types of financial aid. He rejects the United States of American’s aid to South Vietnam because it turned South Vietnam into a colony. Le Kim Chau’s critique of Nguyen Van Trung’s utopia in this sense is not quite accurate. For Le Kim Chau Criticism of Nguyen Van Trung, see Le Kim Chau, pp. 109-110. Le Kim Chau writes: “Trong điều kiện của
một cuộc chiến tranh lạnh”, tức là trong cuộc đối đầu giữa hai phe xã hội chủ nghĩa và tư bản chủ nghĩa lúc bây giờ thì chủ trương của Nguyễn Văn Trung muốn Mĩ giúp đỡ để miền Nam làm cách mạng chống những không phải là “đứng giữa” hay theo “con đường thử ba” mà phải được cái là một áo tưởng rất lớn.” (p. 110)


105 See Lê Kim Châu’s PhD. dissertation “Chủ nghĩa Hiện sinh và một vài ảnh hưởng của nó ở Miền Nam Việt Nam” [Existentialism and its Influence in South Vietnam], Hà Nội, 1996, pp. 107-112. In the dissertation, Lê Kim Châu spent 5 pages discussing the works written by Nguyen Van Trung and Lý Chánh Trung published by Hành trình under the section entitled “Chủ nghĩa hiện sinh đối lập trường chính trị của một số trí thức miền Nam” [Existentialism and Several South Vietnamese Intellectuals’ Political Standpoint]. Though examining Nguyen Van Trung’s and Lý Chánh Trung’s works, Lê Kim Châu’s goal is to prove that Nguyen Van Trung and Lý Chánh Trung’s idea on a non-communist social revolution was imported from Sartre and other Western existentialists, which is rooted in Lê Kim Châu’s Eurocentric leading research question “on Existentialism in South Vietnam, we think there are two aspects that need to be clarified: first, the import and second, the influence” [Về chủ nghĩa hiện sinh ở Miền Nam, theo chúng tôi có hai phương diện cần làm rõ: thứ nhất là quá trình du nhập, thứ hai là những ảnh hưởng] [italic added] (p. 7). Clearly, Vietnamese existential thought in South Vietnam is seeing as the import of and influence by the European existentialism. In addition, Le Kim Chau’s inaccurate judgment that Nguyen Van Trung wanted to depend on the US.’s aid program to implement such a social revolution (Le Kim Chau, p. 110) is not what Nguyen Van Trung suggested. Nguyen Van Trung does not reject financial aid programs but he clearly rejects the United States of America’s aid program because it leded to a colonial social structure of South Vietnam. I already discussed this issue in the chapter “What Should I Do? On Revolution”.

106 See Lý Chánh Trung, Cách mạng và Đạo đức [Revolution and Morality], pp. 54-55 and Nguyen Van Trung, Chủ nghĩa thực dân Pháp ở Việt Nam: Thực chất và Huyền thoại [French Colonialism in Vietnam: Facts and Myths].

107 The Vietnamese scholar of literature Đoàn Hưởng offers an interesting interpretation of the Oriental absolute nothingness as a place that is able to hold all manifestations as differences. For
REFERENCES


Anderson, Thomas C. 1993. _Sartre's two ethics : From authenticity to integral humanity._ La Salle, Ill.: Open Court.


Burns, Emile, Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Joseph Stalin, and Vladimir Ilyich Lenin. 1935. *A handbook of marxism: Being a collection of extracts from the writings of marx, engels and the greatest of their followers, selected so as to give the reader the most comprehensive account of marxism possible within the limits of a single volume*. New York: Random House.


Cao, Thọ Dung. 1969. *Tiểu thuyết nguyên định toàn hình anh một tâm thức bằng rã hay nội trầm luan của tư tưởng chưa chính mủ [nguyen dinh toan’s novels: The image of a divided mentality or the unhappiness of an immature thought]*. *Quản Chúng [the Mass]* 19, : 44-54.
———. 1968. Sự nghèo nàn và tù túng của văn học từ miền bắc đến miền nam [the poverty and imprisonment of literature from the north to the south]. Quán Chứng [the Mass] 5, : 5-21.


195


———. 1965. Emanuel mounier, con người của thời đại [emanuel monier, the man of the present time]. Hành Trình [the Journey] 9, (December): 30-56.


Nguyễn, Trọng Văn. 1979. Hai bộ mặt của chú nghĩa hiện sinh hay tác dụng của chủ nghĩa hiện sinh đối với tảng lốp tri thưc trong phong trào cách mạng chống chế độ Mỹ-nguy [Existentialism’s two faces, or the effect of existentialism on intellectual groups in the revolution against american-southern vietnamese regime]. Paper presented at Hội nghị Khoa học về một số vấn đề trong sinh hoạt tư tưởng ở miền Nam thời Mỹ-Nguy [Conference on Several aspects in ideological practice in South Vietnam during American-Republic of Vietnam], Hồ Chí Minh City.


Nguyễn, Van Trung. 1979-1980. Nhân văn để chú nghĩa hiện sinh, minh xác một vài điều về sự đủ nhập và phổ biến những trường tư tưởng Tây phương vào Việt Nam trước năm 1975 [proving several points on the import and introduction western schools of thought in vietnam before 1975 through the case of existentialism].


———. 1964. Từ sự thất bại của các đảng phái quốc gia đến sự phá sán của tầng lớp trưởng gia thành thị trong vai trò lãnh đạo cách mạng xã hội trước áp lực thống trị của những chủ nghĩa thực dân mới [from the failure of nationalistic parties to the downfall of the urban ruling group in the social revolutionary leadership]. Hành Trình [the Journey] 1, (October): 4-36.


Nhật Hạnh, Thích. 1964. Tìm prajnapti cho thọi đại [search for prajnapti for the present age]. Bach Khoa 177, : 73-81.


Phạm, Văn Sĩ. 1986. *Về tư tưởng và văn hóa phương Tây hiện đại (phác thảo phê bình một số trào lưu tư tưởng và văn hóa hiện đại chủ nghĩa ở phương Tây và ảnh hưởng của chúng trong văn hóa Việt Nam)* [on contemporary western thought and literature (A critical sketch of several contemporary western schools of thought and literature and their influence on Vietnamese literature)]. Hà Nội: Đại học và Trung học chuyên nghiệp.


Studies in the lankavatara sutra, one of the most important texts of Mahayana Buddhism, in which almost all its principal tenets are presented, including the teaching of Zen. London: G. Routledge & sons, ltd.


