INTRODUCTION

AFTER SEVERAL MONTHS OF UNREST AMONG HIS supporters, Captain Dreyfus’s guilt represented, in the eyes of national factions in conflict, no more than a secondary question.¹ France was profoundly split into supporters and adversaries of Captain Alfred Dreyfus. Whether Dreyfus was innocent or guilty, each of the two parties remained unchanged and hardened their positions. Why was it necessary for it to be thus? No one maintains that any human tribunal is infallible; that a court martial ascribed a document to one officer that was the work of another officer is an accident that does not present anything particularly unexpected, and that, in principle, dishonors no one. But quite quickly, immense historical forces coalesced around the judicial pro and con, and instead of a debate between a public minister and a lawyer, there was an existential combat in which we saw the clash of the highest regulating values of political life; a combat of spirits incarnated in powerful social formations.
Such warfare is without mercy, each of the belligerents being internally carried away by a twofold dynamic, irresistible when conjoined, of metaphysics and history. Dreyfusism was simultaneously a certain conception of justice and the will to live of groups that joined hands with such a conception of justice; anti-Dreyfusism was simultaneously a certain conception of the necessities of political life and the will to live of groups that joined hands with such a conception of the necessities of political life; both the one and the other had its god and defended a hearth; a simple scuffle between private covetousness would never have reached the dimensions of the Dreyfus revolution. Each party multiplied errors and faults, and perhaps it should be said that, in this affair, there was only one innocent person, namely Captain Dreyfus himself.

It has already been noted many times that the situation of the French nation, faced with the Italo-Ethiopian conflict, strangely recalls the Dreyfus period. In those days, ladies of the house used to beg their guests not to speak about the Dreyfus Affair; today their daughters would do well to avoid organizing a meeting between Mussolini’s followers and believers in the League of Nations. France, internally divided over so many questions, is, in addition, cut in two by the expedition that a foreign state is carrying out in a distant country. Shall we say that these are merely simple differences of opinion about the way to assure what is the common goal of all French men and women, namely the general peace and France’s security? Differences of opinion that bring about such a release of passions are not superficial, but deep; here, as in the time of the Dreyfus Affair, we are witnesses to a conflict of two spirits, of two conceptions of justice, political life, and the future of humanity. And just as at the time of the Dreyfus Affair, it is quite possible that
neither of these two spirits is rooted in principles sufficiently resistant to and free from error.

The present essay is the work of a philosopher who has hardly published, until now, anything but metaphysical works. It is not meant to be a historical work, or to make an original contribution to establishing the facts; the reactions of French political opinion constitute the object of this study. The relevance of events and governmental actions will not be recalled, or eventually judged, except as the objects of political evaluations offered by French opinion. This perspective seems to me to correspond fully to the philosopher’s vocation and not to exceed his competence. If it is true that certain basic choices, involving the values without which life is not worth living, are implied in the positions taken by French political thought with respect to the Italo-Ethiopian conflict, it is not without interest to isolate the philosophical meaning of such choices; if it is true that the division dominant in France with respect to the Italian effort represents the conflict of large ideas incarnated in grand historical forces, it is not idle to undertake the philosophical elucidation of these ideas.