Finite Subjectivity:

A Theme in

Descartes, Kant, and Kierkegaard

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To the memory of

my father

Frederick B. Stafford

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Abstract

The notion of finite subjectivity is a category which functions as a central, unifying theme for the diverse thinkers within the existential movement. In fact, the vision of man as a being whose concrete freedom-within-finitude eludes absorption into any objective or universal system is the fundamental assumption from which existence philosophers launch their radical critique of traditional metaphysical thought. Nevertheless, it must be said that the genesis of this revolutionary perspective owes much to the very tradition which it opposes.

The early chapters of this study therefore examine the roots of the category in Descartes and Kant, while bearing in mind the existential insistence that the standpoint of the finite subject embodies a negative relationship even to its own historical foundations. It is argued that both the Cartesian cogito and Kant's transcendental subject are abstract, though essential, precursors of existentialism's concretely existing subject. Attention is focused upon Descartes' and Kant's analyses of the relationships between the finite and infinite, freedom and reason, reason and faith, with a view to showing how the emergence of the notion of the finite subject fulfills certain possibilities implicit in these analyses, while also presenting itself as a radical resolution to problems which metaphysical accounts of the existing subject generate, but in principle cannot address.

Since in the thought of Søren Kierkegaard the notion of finite subjectivity receives its first explicit thematization, this study devotes considerable effort to examining the relationships and divergences among Kierkegaard, Descartes, and Kant's understanding of the nature and role of individual subjectivity. It then traces in some detail Kierkegaard's appreciation of the notion of authentic ethico-religious existence, as this is developed in his Concluding Unscientific Postscript. It is argued that while Kierkegaard's intention is to defend the concrete reality of "ethical inwardness," yet the absolute

primacy which he ascribes to the standpoint of finite subjectivity undermines the independent authority of all modes of otherness--including that of God himself--and so prevents the development of a genuinely concrete subjective standpoint. Further, this standpoint of radical inwardness can only be maintained through an essential (though necessarily unexpressed) relationship to those very metaphysical categories which the standpoint of finite subjectivity is intended to transcend. This problematic relationship of the standpoint of existence to the metaphysical--already implicit in Kierkegaard's existential dialectic--becomes the impetus and the context for many of the central tensions and debates which continue to animate contemporary philosophies of existence.

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Foreword

> Devoted to a foundational and rigorous examination of the human condition, existentialism has emerged as an emphatic philosophy of human finitude in which the concepts of finite freedom, temporality, historicity, non-being, estrangement, anxiety, death, guilt, and resolve are central. Already in Kant's Critique of Pure Reason, with its classic demonstration of the finite character of human reason which fractures itself when it seeks for a rational unification of the conditions of experience, we see the inauguration of a philosophy of finitude. It was not, however, until the advent of existentialism that this philosophy of finitude found its deliberate and disciplined expression.[1]
>
> Man alone asks questions with reflective deliberation, and with himself as a primary subject under inquisition. It is almost a proper existentialist definition of man that he is capable of posing questions about his own being and being in general. Appreciation of this unique capacity is the constitutive mark of the existential manner of philosophizing.[2]

While Western philosophy has always had regard to the finitude of human reality, such reflections until recently found their place within the perennial project of achieving metaphysical knowledge about being as a whole--a project which of its very essence seeks in some way to transcend the limits of man's finite thought and practice. Finitude as such, then, was not a central theme for traditional metaphysics or ontology.

Similarly, although in modern philosophy questions about the nature of being can no longer be asked in abstraction from questions about the role of the knowing subject, yet it has been as an essential moment within larger endeavors--i.e., in Descartes' attempt to ground

[1] Calvin Schrag, Existence and Freedom (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1961), pp. xi-xii.

[2] James D. Collins, The Existentialists (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1967), p. 218.

scientific and metaphysical truth in the self-evidence of the cogito, in Kant's enquiry into the conditions of the possibility of knowledge--that human subjectivity has acquired its significance. Only with existentialism does subjectivity emerge as a sphere of enquiry in its own right, the appreciation and elucidation of which, it is claimed, is self-justifying.[3]

But what is most characteristic of existential philosophy's approach and content is neither its consistent thematizing of human subjectivity, nor its stress upon man's essential finitude, but its determination to forge from the union of these two categories a radically new perspective for philosophy. Seen as crucial co-determinants of human being, the poles of finitude and subjectivity constitute the context within which philosophical activity may finally free itself from the traditional metaphysical dichotomies of subject/object, ego/world, without thereby forfeiting all claims to significance. For existentialism, the category of finite subjectivity thus acts as a focus through which to criticize, reinterpret, reject, or replace the methods and conclusions of traditional philosophy, as well as itself comprising a content uniquely appropriate to this new style of philosophizing.

For it is in explicit rebellion against what it views as the bankruptcy of Western metaphysics--particularly in its development from Descartes to Hegel--that existentialism proclaims the centrality of the finite subject. The failure of the metaphysical tradition, existence philosophers argue, can be attributed to the way certain dimensions of human experience have been elevated and exaggerated,

[3] Kant indeed saw man as the being who is by nature disposed toward metaphysics--i.e., is driven by an "inward need" to seek the unconditioned grounds of himself, the world of his experience, and beyond. But this disposition to metaphysics Kant saw as the basis for an urgent enquiry into the possibility of metaphysics as such, and not into "man-the-metaphysician." In contrast, Heidegger's assertion that human existence (Dasein) is "ontically distinguished by the fact that in its very Being, that Being is an issue for it" exemplifies the existentialists' interest in the intrinsic ontological significance of the human self-experience. In Heidegger, for instance, this statement is the germ of a vast "fundamental ontology" which approaches all Being through human existence--an ontology for which metaphysics and metaphysical questions are second-order phenomena, modes of Dasein's "Being-in-the-world."

while others have been excluded from consideration by the very nature of the original philosophical enterprise. Thus, for example, while conceived as an attempt to achieve a comprehensive knowledge of reality, modern philosophy has continuously crippled its own potential by predetermining what could count as knowing and what was meant by the real. Post-Cartesian philosophy defines its goal as the search for absolute wisdom, whose attainment would do away with man's bondage to finite temporal existence and/or render his subjectivity transparent to itself. But pursuit of this transcendent metaphysical ideal, existentialists generally contend, systematically obscures the intrinsic significance and value of finite human subjectivity as such.

While existentialists have in many instances taken over the language of speculative idealism, the motive, they claim, is to reveal the poverty and abstractness of the usage to which key concepts of modern thought have been put, and to infuse the traditional terminology with the life and richness denied in its original context. They confront the heritage of modern philosophy, then, with the express intention of making a revolutionary break with entrenched modes of thought and expression--a break which is to be accomplished by presenting in a new light the very categories developed by metaphysical thinkers. Recasting these terms with reference to the idea of concrete finite subjectivity, they hold, will give rise to a new style of communication which is not in thrall to the restrictive dichotomies and abstractions of earlier reflection.

To grasp existence philosophy's unique self-understanding, then, it is fruitful to approach the notion of the finite subject at its historical foundations--to take account of its conditions of possibility in various aspects of the tradition, but also to pay serious heed to the existentialists' insistence that only from within an attitude radically opposed to traditional systematic philosophy can the genuine import of this notion--itself a complex response to difficulties inherent in metaphysical speculation--be comprehended.

It has been noted frequently that the existential perspective has functioned as a minor theme, and recurrent foil, for the logical and systematic philosophizing central to the Western tradition. But metaphysical thinking has never hitherto centered on the theme of human finitude and subjectivity for its own sake. Rather

it is significant that not until Western metaphysicians had already enquired profoundly into the relation of man's self-consciousness to Being, and into the meaning and scope of human reason and freedom, could there arise this doctrine which sees in metaphysical enquiry itself an abstract project of that concrete subjectivity within which man always already dwells. The foundations for this radical existentialist vision must therefore be sought in the very tradition from which it dissociates itself--in those philosophies for which finitude and subjectivity remained moments in the overarching quest for metaphysical wisdom.

Hence, the present study begins with a consideration of the roots of the theme of finite subjectivity in the metaphysical thought of Descartes and Kant. Existence philosophers regard the Cartesian cogito and the Kantian transcendental ego as abstract, empty forms of subjectivity, which fail to express the richness of individual subjective existence. Yet it is arguable that the existential presupposition of the absolute priority of the being of the existing subject over all logical, scientific, and metaphysical modes of thought, and its steadily deepening effort to effect a concrete synthesis of universal and particular aspects of subjectivity, are themselves projects which are formulated upon the ground of Cartesian and Kantian categories. With this in mind, this study will focus upon those "revolutionary" dimensions of Descartes' and Kant's thought which contribute most profoundly to the emergence of existentialism as a perspective which both realizes certain essential possibilities implicit in metaphysical speculation upon the nature and role of the subject, while for that very reason generating a radical critique of the place of systematic philosophy in the understanding of subjective existence.

In particular, the Cartesian discovery of the cogito as the ground of metaphysical knowledge already involves an attempt to develop a concretely subjective standpoint, but at the same time provides the impetus toward a critique of the possibility of achieving metaphysical knowledge of this subjective foundation. The study also explores the relationship between Descartes' theory of knowledge and his ethical principles, in order to clarify the centrality of the notion of freedom in the emergence of the cogito as the presupposition of all thought and action.

Kant's subsequent development of the notion of transcendental subjectivity is intended to resolve certain ambiguities inherent in the cogito--especially the question of whether the subjective authority which grounds all knowledge is a concretely individual, empirical ego, or universal a priori rational consciousness as such. The study focuses upon the crucial role of the Ideas of God and Freedom in Kant's attempt concretely to unify the orders of thinking and actuality. It argues that while for both Descartes and Kant reason, freedom, subjectivity, and God are mutually implicatory concepts, yet Kant's stress upon the essential finitude of human experience, his limitation of knowledge to finite experience, and of metaphysical activity to thought about transcendent reality, and his defence of the primacy of freedom--i.e., of practical over theoretical reason--provide the context for the emergence of the existential notion of the radically finite, yet elusive and essentially free individual subject.

Although Kant's transcendental idealism is succeeded historically by Hegel's absolute idealism, and although indeed Kierkegaard's existentialism emerges in explicit opposition to the Hegelian system, this study does not deal in any detail with the Hegelian philosophy. Kierkegaard's and Hegel's approaches to the problem of finite subjectivity are divergent responses to difficulties within Kant's conception of the nature of human subjectivity. While it would therefore be most fruitful to compare their radically opposed estimates of the relation between the existing subject and philosophical idealism, the concern here is to elucidate the positive foundations, within the tradition, of contemporary existence philosophy. Therefore, the remainder of the study considers Kierkegaard's turn to concrete subjective existence, interpreting it as at one and the same time a fulfillment of directions and a revolutionary solution to problems already implicit in Kant and Descartes.

With Kierkegaard, the notion of finite subjectivity first explicitly assumes the thematically central position it continues to hold in contemporary existence philosophy. Hence the argument traces the development and considers in detail the nature and significance--the strengths and limitations of the Kierkegaardian perspective. Kierkegaard's intention is to articulate the concrete, essential priority of "ethical inwardness" over all "otherworldly,"

abstract, metaphysical thinking, but also to ensure that this radical turn to subjectivity cannot be confused with a merely arbitrary subjectivism. Therefore, the relationship between the individual exister and the Absolute--God, the "eternal essential Truth"--assumes importance as the sole context within which the finite subject may achieve a genuinely concrete existence. However, Kierkegaard's radical stress upon the freedom, the finitude and insurmountable temporality of the existing individual--while it is intended to counteract the abstractions and the dehumanization flowing from the results and the ideals of traditional metaphysical speculation--itself generates tensions and abstractions, confrontation with which comprises the challenging problematic for current widely divergent philosophies of existence.

Chapter One

The Cartesian Roots of the "Existential Turn"

1. Descartes' Turn to Subjectivity

Existentialists concur in accepting that René Descartes' search for a primary datum, a self-evident foundation for truth, marked a momentous break with the theology-dependent metaphysics of the middle ages. But they equally argue that the termination of his method of doubt in the intuition "cogito ergo sum" set the course for a future philosophy whose difficulties could never be resolved within the Cartesian framework. Their attitude toward Descartes' "turn to subjectivity," then, is ambiguous. On the one hand, no philosopher of existence has failed to link his own mode of reflection somehow with the radical style of the Cartesian approach. On the other, Descartes' conclusions, and their consequences for the development of modern metaphysics, they have subjected to intense scrutiny.[1] Cartesianism, however variously

[1] The existential critique of Descartes most often focuses upon his misleading identification of the subject with the knowing subject. Existential thinkers generally concur that while indeed subjectivity is the incontrovertible starting-point for philosophy, it is the concretely existing subject, rather than the abstractly epistemological ego, which constitutes the "indubitable" foundation for knowledge. It is useful to contrast this existentialist assessment of Descartes with the phenomenologist Edmund Husserl's criticism that Descartes' approach was insufficiently radical--that by clinging to a substantialist view of the self as a "thing which thinks," he failed to reveal the truly foundational sphere of transcendental subjectivity. The existentialist quest for a concrete subjective standpoint does not involve any revival of the "substantialist" self of Descartes, but neither does it share the idealist Husserl's vision of "concreteness" as a function of transcendental constituting activity. Indeed, later "existential phenomenologists," such as Martin Heidegger, broke with Husserl partly because they saw his

interpreted, is never a matter of indifference to existence philosophy, which, with its emphasis on the primacy of the finite human subject, seems always to move in the light--or the shadow--of the cogito.

Why do Cartesian themes speak so clearly to these contemporary philosophers, while yet evoking their continuing demands for reassessment? How is this historical but still vital bond relevant for our present investigation? To find answers we must try and capture something of the spirit of Descartes' revolution in philosophy.

For medieval metaphysicians the pursuit of truth through reason always remained under the guidance of faith and revelation. Thought, properly employed, could not ultimately conflict with theological doctrine, and if conflicts arose the final appeal must be to divine authority. To know God was man's highest occupation, and if he could achieve metaphysical truth about the fundamental characteristics of Being it was because his God-given nature as a "rational animal" granted him this assurance. Even in the self-confident cultural climate of Renaissance humanism, intellectual adventurers prefaced their enthusiastic new investigations into Nature and Man with the assertion that God had enjoined upon them the duty to use human reason thus, in order better to glorify God and his creation. Descartes participated thoroughly in the religious, yet humanistic, mood of his times:

> I consider that all those to whom God has given the use of Reason are obliged to employ it principally for trying to know Him, and for knowing themselves. It is through the use of Reason that I have tried to commence my studies . . . .[2]

Even here, though, he clearly aspires to more than the use of his reason in the service of God. While medieval philosophy takes for granted the priority of being over thought, so that man's capacity

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transcendental idealism as a failure to free subjectivity from the narrowness and abstractness of its Cartesian origins.

[2] From a letter of Descartes to Mersenne, 1629, in René Descartes' Oeuvres, ed., Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris: J. Vrin, 1969), Vol. I, p. 144; my translation.

to know is a premise within a primarily theocentric perspective, Descartes' hope was to ground knowledge of being within human thinking itself, thus emancipating reason from its subordinate relationship to faith, and metaphysics from the endless uncertainty and disputes which were its lot.[3] Descartes' significance as the "father of modern philosophy" lies in his refusal to submit to any authority save that of his own consciousness, and in his determination to exhibit the necessary and indeed foundational role which subjective certainty plays within anyone's claim truly to know the content of his everyday experience, of scientific investigation, or of metaphysical reflection.

Descartes addressed his reflections to "those who avail themselves only of their natural reason in its purity" and who "unite good sense with study."[4] He set forth his method in popular autobiographical style, emphasizing always that the reasoning he employs to reach truth is his own alone, and that anyone who would judge of the correctness of his thinking can do so only if they are willing to repeat his meditations for themselves. Thus Descartes combines in his very manner of presentation the faith that " . . . the power of forming a good judgment, and of distinguishing the true from the false. . . . Good sense, or Reason, is by nature equal in all men"[5] with the view that the truths of Reason rest ultimately not only on the veracity of thought in general (i.e., the principles of logic), but are guaranteed only by the individual who grasps them with certainty through the pwer of his reflective act. Descartes' conception of human reason is couched in empirical, even personal, terms. But implicit in his mode of enquiry is the view that every individual "I think" embodies universal reason. The factual

[3] René Descartes, "Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason" [hereafter cited as Discourse on the Method], in The Philosophical Works of Descartes, trans., E. S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross (London: Cambridge University Press, 1911; reprint U.S.A.: Dover Publications, 1955), Vol. I, p. 86; all subsequent citations of English translations of Descartes' works will refer to this edition.

[4] Ibid., p. 130.

[5] Ibid., p. 81.

diversity of individual judgments and experience, which have in the past led to skepticism, is offset by Descartes' claim to have discovered a method of "rightly conducting reason" which leads necessarily to truth, but which nevertheless demands from the individual his personal involvement and resolution.

Throughout the classical period in philosophy, thinkers customarily distinguished mere individual human consciousness from the power, objectivity, and immutability of Reason itself. Socrates, when he found truth within himself, attributed it to his "daemon." For Plato and Aristotle, Divine Reason could be thought of as a first cause of reality, in which human reason participated. The Cartesian understanding of human rationality is revolutionary in its independence from such divine support. Remaining a devout Christian, Descartes nevertheless originated a philosophical approach which claimed, at its starting-point, no recourse to an objective, transcendent guiding Rationality. To discover truth, he falls back only upon the potential of his own person, his own particular reasoning capacity. But what occurs in the Cartesian meditations is that this individual subject, in liberating himself from the inherent prejudices and limitations of his finite experience and understanding, discovers that his reason can, with effort, intuit itself to be not simply his contingent rationality, but can in fact apprehend itself as essential--as an absolute, for, yet within, itself. Not without justice is the comment that "[Descartes'] consciousness that reason is 'my reason' is the opening shot of the Enlightenment."[6] For by bringing reason to a consciousness of its own nature, i.e., to self-consciousness, Descartes inaugurated the battle for a truly secular rationality--a rationality which finally liberates man from bondage to faith in an incomprehensible "beyond," but which also, according to many post-Enlightenment philosophers,[7]

[6] Hiram Caton, The Origin of Subjectivity (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1973), p. 32.

[7] Both Hegelian Absolute Idealism and the existentialist thinkers criticize Enlightenment Reason for its failure to deal with the concreteness of finite subjective spirit. Existentialists, however, argue that Hegelian Reason is the apotheosis of this mode of abstract, idealizing reflection, and as such part of the problem generated by Enlightenment thought, rather than a solution to its "dehumanizing" tendencies.

can lead the individual into a newer and more insidious form of servitude, to "human reason" itself.

But if Descartes were significant only as a distant precursor of Enlightenment values, it would be hard to understand why his thought remains a vital source for existentialist philosophers, to be considered ever anew, even as it is condemned for its narrow "epistemological" version of concrete subjectivity. While the rejection of Descartes' "knowing" subject, as a category inadequate to characterize concrete human selfhood, negatively illuminates what is intended by the concept of a finite "existing" subject, yet it is also through the cogito that certain positive themes treated by the philosophers of finitude also find their source in the tradition.

In the meditation leading to the cogito, and in his subsequent examination of the contents of consciousness, Descartes' purpose is to move beyond the limits of self-conscious inwardness and establish that man has a real relationship to an objective order. Achieving the security of the cogito is never an end in itself, but a means of showing, once and for all, that skepticism regarding the existence of objective being, and regarding the possibility of knowing that being, is unwarranted. Thus, Descartes is not a philosopher of subjectivity in the sense intended by contemporary existentialists.[8] However, his establishment of the immediate unity of being and thought as contained in the primordial reflective act of the cogito would not have been possible without a radical revision of what it meant to philosophize, indeed of what it meant to be a human individual. The outcome of this revision constitutes what remains the most crucial link between existentialism and the metaphysical tradition it opposes.

At the very least, the Cartesian turn to subjectivity, as the only self-verifying foundation for knowledge, meant that the

[8] It is precisely for his failure to remain within the self-evidence of the cogito that Descartes is criticized by transcendental phenomenology, while existential thinkers contend that his weakness lay in isolating the self from the "life-world" in which it always already participates. For both groups, the Cartesian need to overcome skepticism vanishes, if the cogito is properly understood, not simply as a methodological tool for gaining access to an external reality, but as somehow containing concrete reality within itself.

metaphysician himself, rather than the truth of any particular body of doctrine, must henceforth assume a greater significance for thought. The truths of logic, mathematics, and science, for example, seemed neither more, nor less, certain to Descartes than to other scientists and philosophers. He, too, could not help but give his assent to this body of conclusions, and his method took nothing from the indubitability which seemingly accompanies their apprehension. Similarly, the Christian faith in theological doctrines, and in the reality of God himself, lost nothing of their content under the assault of Descartes' method of doubt. Cartesian certainty arises at a much deeper point than the compelling certainty that follows upon recognition of logical and scientific principles, or the urgent will to believe in a content "true in itself" which lies at the heart of religious faith. In embarking upon his method of doubt--and most especially the "hyperbolical doubt" expressed in the hypothesis of the evil genius--Descartes is calling into question the whole range of human certainties--sensory, logical, and religious--while never for a moment denying their experiential validity. His doubt is methodological, but one cannot say "merely" so, for in the philosophical resolve to seek that which cannot be doubted, were God himself a deceiver, Descartes generates an order of reflection which--even before it yields the intuition of the cogito--radically questions those relationships between reason and faith, divine authority and human freedom, upon which previous philosophy had been founded.

It has been demonstrated repeatedly that doubt universalized--radical skepticism--reduces itself to a logical absurdity. But Descartes is not trying to establish the validity of a logical proposition here. Rather, through a deliberate act of will, he is asserting a new attitude toward the content of experience, and particularly toward the certainties arising out of that experience. When he resolves to withhold consent even from what by the "instruction of nature" he cannot choose but believe, it is the autonomy of self-conscious reason which Descartes thereby asserts. He may not psychologically be able to doubt that which he clearly and distinctly perceives, nor even much of what his senses reveal to him, but he can doubt that his experience is objectively true. And this is the case no matter what the origin of his certainties:

> But . . . whoever turns out to have created us . . . we still experience a freedom through which we may abstain from accepting as true . . . those things of which we have not certain knowledge . . . .[9]

Through the self-conscious determination of his will (i.e., in faith), the simple Christian believer accepts as true a revelation which surpasses rational understanding. In contrast, Descartes' free resolution is to doubt all that cannot verify itself within his own consciousness. Yet the freedom of faith, the will to believe, arises from the same subjective source as the freedom expressed in the act of doubt; the aim of this freedom in the first instance is to affirm the subject's essential relation to God, in the second, to affirm the necessity of the subject's relation to himself. Descartes' "hyperbolic doubt," then, embodies the coming to consciousness of this freedom of subjectivity, the realization that wherever thought may ultimately come to rest, it cannot arrive there without the participation and mediation of the reflecting subject.

The insight into the freedom of self-consciousness, which here constitutes itself over against even the omnipotence of the divine will, is Descartes' lasting contribution to philosophy. The cogito--the intuition of the concrete unity of being and thinking which is self-conscious reflection--arises on the ground of this free resolution. Subjective freedom, if it does not issue forth in the certainty of the cogito, remains, to be sure, only a negative, skeptical freedom. But unless subjective freedom does first posit itself, no amount of philosophizing will ever reveal the essential relationship between truth and the certainty of self-consciousness.

Existence philosophers are concerned both to assert this originary human freedom and to describe it in appropriate terms. They are the inheritors of the Cartesian legacy, in the sense that they recognize the autonomy of human subjectivity as a sine qua non of genuine philosophizing. But they consider that the content and significance of that subjectivity were inadequately comprehended in the cogito, which is seen as too abstract, too theoretical, too

[9] Descartes, "Principles of Philosophy," in The Philosophical Works of Descartes, Vol. I, Principle VI, p. 221; hereafter cited as Principles of Philosophy.

epistemological in orientation. We have noted that the method of doubt already made explicit the freedom of self-conscious certainty--a freedom which later becomes both the presupposition and explicit content of existence philosophy. Yet this freedom, for Descartes, remained a medium, essential for truth, but in itself an inadequate content for a complete metaphysics. Freedom, for him, is a capacity in which even God cannot surpass us, but unless rooted in a substantial content, it nevertheless leads us into error. The cogito is, in a sense, both revealed and created in the acts of self-conscious freedom, and it is in this concrete unity of being and thinking that Descartes finds the fundamental self-evidence he demands as a basis for overcoming skepticism. For in the reflection "I think, therefore I am" we apprehend an absolute limit to deception, a content which is proof against even divine power. To regard the cogito as simply an abstract "condition of knowing" is to miss the true intention of the method of doubt. The only possible basis for knowledge, Descartes saw, could not be simply something that was experienced with psychological certainty. One may be unable to doubt that which is nevertheless false. There are many such "clear and distinct" ideas which are thus certain--among them axioms of mathematics and fundamental logical principles. But what is needed is more than an abstract, "merely" subjective certainty. If knowledge is to be guaranteed, a thought which leads of itself to being is its only possible starting-point. Precisely such a concrete certainty is the cogito. For the reflection "cogito ergo sum" does not contain a certainty directed toward some content other than itself--rather it is its own content. In the "I think" one experiences not a psychological certainty regarding a specific sensation or image, nor even a logical certainty about a principle or axiom of reflection. One is certain, because one is that certainty! The cogito is an intuition which immediately involves my existence, and it is in this direct connection between my thought, and being itself, that a paradigm and a living example of genuine knowledge emerges:

> But when we become aware that we are thinking beings, this is a primitive act of knowledge derived from no syllogistic reasoning. He who says "I think therefore I am, or exist" does not deduce existence from thought

> by a syllogism, but by a simple act of mental vision, recognizes it as if it were a thing that is known per se.[10]

My own inwardness, or self-identity, is thus the cornerstone upon which knowledge is to be founded. The cogito is not therefore simply an abstract epistemological principle. It is an act of self-conscious freedom, and out of that freedom I achieve a certainty grounded neither upon external authority, nor even upon inner faith, but upon the concrete unity of my certainty with the very act of achieving it.

In one important sense, the cogito is the existential subject "par excellence." Because I am my certainty of self, subjectivity in this instance is indeed truth. Furthermore, that truth is actual only when I exercise my free reflection:

> I am, I exist, is necessarily true each time that I pronounce it, or that I mentally conceive it.[11]

This simple pronouncement "I think, therefore I am" cannot, at this juncture, be viewed as a substantialist view of existence. The self of the cogito is as elusive, as resistant to "objectification" as that subjective "existenz" thematized in existential philosophy. The "I" of the cogito is neither an empirically observable ego, nor an abstractly general first principle, but a presence which cannot be "discovered" like some new feature of the landscape. Its self-actualizing activity is its only truth--yet without that activity, no other truth is conceivable.

It cannot, then, be at this deepest heart of the cogito that the Cartesian concept of selfhood becomes questionable from the existentialist point of view. With Descartes, they share the standpoint of freedom, and the recognition that self-conscious existence is

[10] Descartes, "Reply to the Second Set of Objections," in The Philosophical Works of Descartes, Vol. II, p. 38. This emphasis upon the fundamental connection between truth and action will constitute a central thread in existence philosophy.

[11] Descartes, "Meditations on First Philosophy," in The Philosophical Works of Descartes, Vol. I, p. 150; hereafter cited as Meditations.

intrinsically related to that freedom. But Descartes' aim was not to rest within the fulness of subjectivity--subjective freedom was not for him an end in itself, nor was he satisfied to seek knowledge within the immanence of the cogito. For while clearly nothing so perfectly is for me as I am for myself, yet if we are to relate to the abundance of human experience, a way must be found, he argued, to transcend self-consciousness toward the world. It is not enough that the paradigm of knowing has been found in the certainty of self-awareness; that existential self-certainty must reveal within itself a path to truth. It is in seeking this path that Descartes is led to draw the difficult distinctions between thought and extension, between the natural, causally-determined order and the order of freedom, which ultimately generated the fierce existential critique of Cartesian subjectivity, and through it of the western metaphysical tradition.

For the existentialist, human subjectivity is neither an epistemological bridge to the objective world, nor a thinking substance defined by its "attributes." The human subject is free, but also essentially involved in a "world." Thus, freedom comes to be firmly anchored within human finitude and acquires a range of meanings not possible in the Cartesian context. Central among these is the existential stress on ethical, as opposed to theoretical freedom.[12] Man's subjectivity, they say, is realized only through engagement with his world--a world not primarily definable as an "objective" sphere. Man is as much, or more, an agent as a thinker, and "finite subjectivity" is a title which alone can take account of the multitudinous possibilities of human freedom, while giving absolute priority to none.

It is, however, a long way from the Cartesian characterization

[12] This broad claim should be qualified somewhat, since several "existential phenomenologists"--notably Heidegger, but also, for instance, Jean-Paul Sartre--speak of ethical, or moral, freedom as an "ontic" dimension of human experience, grounded in a deeper "ontological" freedom, which characterizes human existence as such. This, however, does not affect the central point here, which is that freedom--whether it be narrowly "ethical," or ontological, in its scope--is regarded by existential thinkers as a category more truly descriptive of the human condition than the various traditional views, which narrowly characterize human subjectivity as a theoretical, detached, epistemological standpoint, only.

of the self as a "thinking thing" to the complexities of human self-experience approached through the medium of finite subjectivity. The thread of self-conscious freedom indeed unites the beginning of modern metaphysics and its self-proclaimed "overcoming" in contemporary existence philosophy; but they are equally separated by other elements in that rich starting-point. Descartes' thought held in uneasy unity views about the nature of the self and the world whose instability became the problematic for later generations. Thinkers after Descartes usually stressed one or the other of various possible interpretations of knowledge and of human reality which seemed to be implicit in the metaphysics of the cogito. Thus metaphysical oppositions emerged which threatened to plunge philosophy into a renewed skepticism and dogmatism--a state of affairs which Kant felt it his duty to combat. Before asking how Kant's transcendental solution might contribute to the development of a concept of finite subjectivity, however, it is important to consider further some of those conflicting elements of Cartesianism which called forth the lengthy pre-Kantian debate.

2. The Cogito and the Infinite

It is clearly not enough, for Descartes, that the cogito provides a primary intuition upon which knowledge can be based. The only true being which Descartes establishes through the cogito is the being of self-consciousness as such. This he grounds absolutely, such that even God cannot "cause me to be nothing, so long as I think that I am something."[13] But it remains a singular and abstract knowledge, lacking the systematic richness of even the most ordinary human experiences. If we are actually to achieve full knowledge, we must somehow make the transition from the apodictic certainty of the "I think" to a richer content, guaranteed by but not simply identifiable with human subjectivity. Ultimately Descartes seeks the foundation and unity for the isolated acts of self-conscious

[13] Descartes, Meditations, Med. II, p. 150.

reflection in God, whose existence, he argues, alone provides assurance that what we think clearly and distinctly, i.e., what is subjectively certain, also has objective reality. But he maintains that one can and must reveal God's existence from within the subjective standpoint. His efforts to accomplish this reveal relationships between human experience and absolute reality, between finite thinking and knowledge of the infinite, which only now are becoming fully explicit, in contemporary discussions about the nature of finite subjectivity.

In accordance with the demands of the principle of the cogito, then, Descartes does not appeal to God as to an external, objective standard of verification for knowledge; neither does he give a subjective faith in the divine a mediating role between certainty and truth. Rather, he wishes to show that God is a necessary reality to whom human subjectivity is intrinsically related. Insofar as we are skeptical about the possibility of knowledge--i.e., insofar as we are free subjects--we already, he holds, implicitly recognize God's necessity. This relationship between God and human experience, however, cannot be concluded from a chain of syllogistic inferences. On the contrary, he indicates that the subject's knowledge of God is at least as certain as his knowledge of himself, since it has the same source and arises in the same way. The idea of God is "innate in me, just as the idea of myself is innate in me" and my awareness of God's image in me "I perceive by means of the same faculty by which I perceive myself."[14] If this is his view, then the several proofs he offers of God's existence must be seen as a drawing forth of something which we already in a sense know, rather than as an attempt to use logic to establish a new truth. This is certainly the case with the meditation which leads us to the cogito. Once we recognize it, the "I think" is for us a primary intuition, absolutely valid. It is reached by a process of reflection, but this method of doubt ultimately reveals itself as the very activity of free self-consciousness in coming to awareness of its own significance. The

[14] Descartes, Meditations, Med. III, p. 170.

thought itself "cogito ergo sum" is also not the conclusion, nor minor premise and conclusion, of a syllogism--but self-substantiating. Similarly, when we apprehend God's reality, he is claiming, we do so neither merely subjectively, nor through the medium of logical principles. The certainty of God is as concrete as the certainty of self--but this only becomes apparent as one meditates further upon that which is given within the cogito. Such further meditation is not therefore a process of logical proof, but a deepening of our awareness of the nature of human subjectivity.[15]

If the cogito is the first principle of Descartes' philosophy, he nevertheless does not restrict the meaning of this principle to the bare assertion that I exist. While this is the truth whose clarity and distinctness must henceforth serve as the paradigm for all knowledge, yet if the cogito were simply an empty absolute, stripped of all determinations, we would be unable to proceed any further along the path to knowledge. Descartes, however, holds that without sacrificing the absolute validity of the cogito it is possible to have access to a wealth of subjective content which bears within it at least one opening upon a reality that genuinely transcends the self. "But I do not yet know clearly enough what I am, I who am certain that I am."[16]

On the one hand, thought, simple self-consciousness as such, cannot be separated from the self, since it is what the self most essentially is. But Descartes' recognition that I am a "thing which thinks" immediately generates the awareness that while thinking in its pure sense is abstract self-certainty, yet the act of being conscious takes a multitude of forms: "By the word thought I understand all that of which we are conscious as operating in us."[17] And "What is a thing which thinks? It is a thing which doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, which also imagines

[15] Such a meditation constitutes a "proof," of course, in the sense that a proof can be an explication of what is already known implicitly.

[16] Descartes, Meditations, Med. II, p. 150.

[17] Descartes, Principles of Philosophy, Principle IX, p. 222.

and feels."[18] None of these forms, if they are considered to have an objective referent, can be guaranteed by the cogito, to be sure. But, if they are accepted simply as modes of my subjectivity, then they are as certain as that bare certainty of self with which we began:

> For if I say I see, or I walk, therefore I am, and if by seeing or walking I mean the action of my eyes or my legs, my conclusion is not absolutely certain. . . . But if I mean only to talk of my sensation, or my consciously seeming to see or to walk, it becomes quite true, because my assertion now refers only to my mind . . . .[19]

Descartes has distinguished here two rather different senses for the cogito. On the one hand it is the immediate unity of being and thinking which is generated each time I reflect upon myself. On the other, it comprises the whole range of ways the self can be conscious of the endless variety of content which appears as other than its own pure self-reflection. The "essence" of the cogito is self-consciousness as such--but the activity of thinking includes all the possible particular ways that subjectivity can relate itself to otherness. Also, so long as one maintains a suspension of judgment as to the truth of what is experienced, all contents are equally valid. Self-consciousness, and the particular modes of our conscious relation to the world, then, both fall under the title "thinking" for Descartes: the self being as much a "content for itself" as are any other of the "objects" which appear before it. Yet it is the immediate unity of being and thought, in his first formulation of the cogito, which constitutes the unique basis for human knowledge, by overcoming all mere certainties in an actual truth. Here we see an instance of a fundamental ambivalence within human subjectivity which, while not explicitly considered by Descartes, assumes immense importance for Kant, who thematized subjectivity itself from a critical perspective, and for existential philosophers who saw in the Kantian emphasis upon finitude a radical challenge to previous formulations of the problem of human subjectivity, including that of Kant himself.

[18] Descartes, Meditations, Med. II, p. 153; see also Med. III, p. 157.

[19] Descartes, Principles of Philosophy, Principle IX, p. 222.

But leaving aside for a moment the significance of this equivocation within the notion of subjectivity, it is clear that Descartes' widening of the meaning of "thought" to include all possible acts of consciousness makes it possible to inquire into the crucial questions of the existence of God, and of whether he is a deceiver, without assuming in advance the truth of anything transcending the cogito:

> But there is yet another method of inquiring whether any of the objects of which I have ideas within me exist outside of me. If ideas are only taken as certain modes of thought, I recognize amongst them no difference or inequality . . . but when we consider them as images, one representing one thing, and the other another, it is clear that they are very different one from the other . . . .[20]

As long as we consider these ideas as modes of thinking only, never judging whether they "are conformable to the things which are outside me,"[21] we are at liberty to inquire into the differences among them with respect to their degrees of "objective reality"[22]--the extent to which any idea purports to represent the perfection of being, or reality. Searching his mind with this criterion before him, Descartes finds only one idea which represents a perfection of being essentially greater than that of the finite consciousness in which it arises--the thought of God, of

> . . . a substance that is infinite, independent, all-knowing, all-powerful, and by which I myself, and everything else, if anything else does exist, have been created.[23]

This thought of an infinite substance Descartes claims cannot arise in the course of ordinary reflections, because the idea of the infinite is not one which could possibly proceed from my finite experiences.[24] Rather the very fact that I consider myself to be

[20] Descartes, Meditations, Med. III, pp. 161-162.

[21] Ibid., p. 160.

[22] Ibid., p. 162.

[23] Ibid., p. 165.

[24] Ibid., p. 166.

finite is itself possible only because I compare myself with the thought of the infinite. Infinitude is not simply a "negation of the finite" but a notion which makes possible my appreciation of my own inadequacy. Descartes suggests then the startling idea that

> I have in me the notion of the infinite earlier than the finite, to wit, the notion of God before that of myself.[25]

This would appear to undermine the primacy of the cogito which Descartes has with such pain established; but only if one forgets the emphasis upon the freedom of self-consciousness, and upon the equality of all modes of thinking and their immanent objects, which he has also carefully affirmed.

Taking this second qualification first, if all the activities of consciousness are unified under the name of "thinking" then it is not inconsistent to claim that the thought of God is in a sense prior to the thought of self, since they are both, simply qua thoughts, equally expressions of the unity of subjective reflection. Seen in this light, the thought of self--or pure self-consciousness--does not appear to be intrinsically first, to bear unique significance--although his original formulation of the cogito, as we mentioned earlier, does seem to require this. Now that he has meditated upon the various ideas which the self holds with certainty, Descartes may claim to have deepened his appreciation of his original intuition, rather than to have surpassed it. He may say that the cogito now knows itself not only as a thinking self, but as a self who possesses an idea of perfection, and along with it, a consciousness of its own imperfection. To say that this idea of the infinite is now "primary" to the simple consciousness of thinking which the meditations first reveal indicates the profound relationship Descartes comes to affirm between the originary subjective act of doubting, which brings the cogito into view, and the divine substance "in whom all the treasures of science and wisdom are contained."[26]

[25] Descartes, Meditations, Med. III, p. 166. "For how would it be possible that I should know that I doubt and desire, that is to say, that something is lacking to me, and that I am not quite perfect, unless I had within me some idea of a Being more perfect than myself . . . ?" Ibid.

[26] Ibid., Med. IV, p. 172.

But the notion of the Infinite is primary in a more profound sense, because of its essential connection with the freedom of the doubting, hence finite, self. The act of doubting can be viewed in two different ways within the standpoint of the cogito. All modes of consciousness have, for Descartes, equal validity simply as activities which are "mine." Thus, I am a being who "doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, which also imagines and feels," and no distinction is drawn as to the relative significance or function of these divergent ways of thinking. In this context, then, we can construe doubt as simply one particular relationship consciousness may bear toward its (to use a phenomenological phrase) "intended objects." But the attitude of doubt also occupies a unique position in the Cartesian scheme, since it is through the use of hyperbolic doubt, i.e., the resolve to refuse consent to the truth of even the most certain experiences, as if a deceiving genius were responsible for them, that the security of the cogito is reached. But the self's unassailable freedom from divine authority, mainifested negatively in this act of radical doubt, and positively in the independent, self-substantiating truth of the cogito, Descartes now draws back into essential unity with the Infinite:

> And when I consider that I doubt, that is to say, that I am an incomplete and dependent being, the idea of a being which is complete and independent, that is, of God, presents itself to my mind with so much distinctness and clearness . . . that I do not think that the human mind is capable of knowing anything with more evidence and certitude.[27]

In the hypothesis of the evil demon, the self asserted its capacity to doubt even what seems most certain--thus, the freedom of self-consciousness emerged as a radical separation of the self from all externality and objective necessity, including God himself. But here it appears that that very act of separating oneself from the absolute requires that one see oneself as already possessing an essential relationship to infinite reality. Skepticism, for Descartes, is never an end in itself--it presupposes that knowledge

[27] Descartes, Meditations, Med. IV, pp. 171-172.

is at least possible, and thus presupposes some appreciation of what knowledge really is. To recognize truth in the cogito--i.e., in the unity of thinking and being--we must indeed have passed through absolute doubt, but such doubt can only be the project of a self who desires to know--who already implicitly recognizes that he has not got truth, and hence what the form of genuine truth would be. The doubting self is thus a self whose originary act of freedom has as its motive the consciousness of inadequacy, of finitude, which can only arise in relation to a corresponding awareness of perfection, the Infinite, or God. The formulation "I doubt, therefore I am" is not then merely another mode of being self-certain. It is also the supreme expression of self-conscious freedom, which we see here preserves at its very core a reciprocity between the finite self and infinite reality. In one act, the self unifies its own radical freedom--God-like in its "infinitude"[28]--with an equally essential finitude.

So, not only a free subject, but equally, a subject profoundly conscious of its own finitude, is thus seen as necessarily involved in the Cartesian quest for truth: only one who doubts seeks certainty, and doubt is an expression of one's sense of finitude. Yet this sense itself speaks of a completeness, so that finitude is a state peculiar to one who does not see himself as radically other than the infinite. Indeed, the very freedom of self-consciousness is an "infinite" freedom, which, however, actualizes itself through recognizing the self's finitude in the act of absolute skepticism. Through radical doubt, then, the self at one and the same time embraces and transcends its own finiteness, actualizes yet limits its infinite self-conscious freedom. Each aspect of the cogito's activity requires the other, each nevertheless is the other's negation.

It is because the finite and the Infinite are thus intrinsically united at the heart of the cogito's self-awareness that Descartes thinks it possible to find within subjectivity the grounds for objective truth. Just as the cogito's initial truth lies in its concrete unification of thinking and being, so now it seems that the

[28] See Descartes, Meditations, Med. IV, pp. 174-175.

act in which that unity is realized is a complex fusion of both the aspects of infinite freedom and recognition of finitude. In a sense, I can aspire to truth--the unity of finite and infinite--only because it is already within me.

Descartes never ontologically identifies the finite human subject and Infinite Substance, God. God, he says, is completely actual, while man realizes his potential gradually and never fully.[29] Yet, I nevertheless "understand God to be actually infinite, so that He can add nothing to His supreme perfection."[30] That understanding is present in me, a finite being, because I could not so characterize myself as finite--thus not be finite spirit,[31] were it not in the light of that which is perfect. There is an essential relationship, then, between free, finite subjectivity and the Absolute. As Descartes says, I know both myself and God by means of the "same faculty."[32] Now the self-knowledge of the cogito is not achieved through an image or even a logical concept of myself: I actually am the act of knowing in which I discover myself. If we know God by means of the "same faculty," then we must know him equally directly, and in his actuality. Descartes does not want to claim that we know God completely in this way--but then neither does the cogito provide us with comprehensive knowledge of ourselves. Furthermore, if we did know God completely, we of course would not be knowing God![33] But while he often remarks that God's ways and

[29] Descartes, Meditations, Med. III, p. 167.

[30] Ibid.

[31] For further explication of this relationship between thinking myself to be finite, and being finite, see Ch. I, 3, pp. 25-27.

[32] Descartes, Meditations, Med. III, p. 170.

[33] Ibid., p. 166. The essential element in the "knowledge" of God is to know him as Infinite, i.e., to know what it would be to be Infinite, rather than to know the content of Infinitude for oneself. The latter would require, paradoxically, that one embrace, limit, comprehend God--thus, one's object could not then be God, or alternately, one would oneself be God. In a letter to Clerselier (January 12, 1696), Descartes distinguishes between the "apprehension" of God--which is analogous to being aware of a mountain, or the sea, which by their very nature we cannot grasp in a comprehensive experience--and "comprehension" of him, which is impossible (see The Philosophical Works of Descartes, Vol. II, p. 130).

reasons are incomprehensible to us finite beings, he also repeats that the divine presence is known with as great a certainty as ourselves, indeed even before ourselves, as the ground of our desire to know and our resolution to doubt.

It is evident then that for Descartes knowledge of the infinite is not only possible, but necessary, if we are to have knowledge of ourselves, and hence of anything else. The cogito and the Absolute are, in a sense, equiprimordial experiences, since it is only through our subjective freedom that we can seek the true in itself, yet it is only because the Infinite is already with us that we are motivated to actualize our freedom in that direction. There exists a bond between human finitude and the Absolute, such that, although man may be finite--a skeptic, in doubt of his own capacities--it is for that very reason that God is accessible to him.[34] Genuine knowledge, for Descartes, is not tied to the senses, or to the imagination, but to what he equivocally terms "understanding." It is evident, however, that this capacity is not a simple equivalent for the narrower technical significance given it later by Kant--although he frequently does use understanding to refer only to the purely logical use of reasoning, as in, say, mathematics. If it were limited to this usage, however, Descartes could not claim that we "understand" God's nature, since in its narrower connotation to "understand" surely means to "comprehend," and Descartes says often that while we may "apprehend" (aperçoive) God, we can never "comprehend" his infinite nature. The faculty by which we "know" God, since it is the same faculty by which we know ourselves, must be the faculty of "thought"--that self-conscious act of freedom which Descartes says unifies all particular modes of consciousness--understanding, will, imagination amongst them.

[34] It is interesting in this connection to compare Descartes and Kant. For the latter, man's finitude and his dependence upon sense--knowledge--is precisely what prevents him from knowing God--a view which leads to the radical distinction (between the self as knower and as believer) which "makes room for faith." Clearly, the meaning of human knowing and "finiteness" in relation to subjectivity must change significantly during the development from Descartes to Kant, for this to be necessary.

The objection might here be raised, "How can all thinking be an expression of freedom, if, as Descartes himself says, thinking includes sensing and feeling, activities which surely are not governed by freedom?" But it must be stressed that by "thought" Descartes means that power of self-conscious reflection which the human mind may exercise upon all the varieties of particular conscious experiences he may have. In other words, he is not using "thought" as a general class concept under which individual conscious states such as feeling, sensing, etc., fall. Rather he is indicating that insofar as it is a human being who feels, desires, and so on--and not an animal, necessarily immersed in the immediacy of whatever experience it is undergoing--then those particular conscious experiences are in principle bound up with this power of self-conscious reflection, of thought. Thus, he is not identifying the various activities of consciousness with the synthesizing power of self-conscious Reason: "I am not more than a thing which thinks, that is to say a mind or a soul, or an understanding or a reason . . . ."[35] Nevertheless, even those conscious experiences which are forced upon me--as is the case with desires, sensations, and emotion--and which therefore are not empirical examples of freedom, are potentially one and all mine, through that freedom of self-relationality which both distinguishes and unites the various particular elements comprising psychic life. Thus, it is this overarching synthetic power of self-conscious thought--Reason, in a sense more fundamental than the technical rationality of calculation or analysis--which is the true locus of freedom for Descartes. It is in this sense that thought can be identified essentially with all the particular acts of consciousness, even those whose empirical content seems to contradict this possibility.[36]

[35] Descartes, Meditations, Med. II, p. 152.

[36] Ibid., p. 153. "Certainly it is no small matter if these things [feeling, sensing, etc.] pertain to my nature. But why should they not so pertain? Am I not that being who now doubts everything, who nevertheless understands certain things, who affirms that one only is true . . . who desires to know more . . . who imagines many things, sometimes indeed despite his will, and who perceives many likewise, as by the intervention of his bodily

So when Descartes says that the self is finite, this term acquires its meaning primarily in the context of that "thoughtful" relationship which obtains between the self-conscious self and its particular experiences, notably the experience of God. The self is finite not simply in abstract opposition to the Absolute, as its negation merely. Rather, the very finitude of man--expressed in his consciousness of otherness from the Absolute--is that which opens the way to the Absolute and assures that God is an actuality for us. The cogito seems to unify finitude and infinitude within itself, and to just as surely draw them apart. In relation to abstract, logical understanding, the infinite remains an incomprehensible beyond; yet this must be "known" to us (apprehended) if we are to experience ourselves as finite. On the other hand, infinity acts within us as self-conscious freedom--a freedom that for Descartes is, formally, one with God's. But precisely because it is God's "similitude" in me, this freedom requires that I assert my independence, in radical opposition to divine authority. Yet, finally, the autonomy of rational thought can only justify its certainties with reference to an absolute content, so that subjectivity once again seeks to ground itself and its truth in that which lies essentially beyond itself, God. Clearly there lies at the heart of the Cartesian philosophy a recognition of a dialectical relationship between the self and the Absolute--a relationship which expresses itself in terms of an identification of the cogito with God, and equally in terms of its distinction from him.[37]

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organs? . . . For it is so evident of itself that it is I who doubts . . . and who desires, that there is no reason here to add anything to explain it . . . . Finally, I am the same who feels . . . who perceives certain things as by the organs of sense . . . ." Even if these experiences are completely passive, and furthermore refer to no reality beyond himself, Descartes insists that " . . . it is at least quite certain that it seems to me that I see light, etc. . . . properly speaking, it is what is in me called feeling, and used in this precise sense, that is no other thing than thinking." [All emphases are mine.]

[37] It will become apparent in the subsequent examination of the existential category of "finite subjectivity" that this question of the relationship between a finite self and the Infinite, or Absolute, is not an issue which can be dismissed as an irrelevant remnant of the metaphysical tradition. In fact, precisely this problem motivates one of the earliest explicit treatments of finite subjectivity, in

3. The Cogito and Finitude

The finitude of human subjectivity thus evidently plays an important role in Cartesian philosophy. It is linked with his appreciation of the significance of freedom in the pursuit of knowledge; it manifests a crucial relationship between the human subject and the Absolute. The thought that I am finite, i.e., "I doubt," is perhaps the most fruitful to which the cogito can lay claim, since it liberates the self from its merely immanent experience, by implying the necessity of a veracious God. Yet although the act of recognizing one's finitude enables the self thus to transcend its pure inwardness, it is equally this affirmation of finitude that sets the seal upon that profound diremption of self-conscious reflection (freedom) from the natural world, and from the natural, empirical self, which also characterizes Descartes' philosophy, and plagues his philosopical successors.

To be freely self-conscious requires that one also be conscious of finitude--conscious of one's participation in a world of extension, of mechanistically-determined entities over which one has no absolute control, but equally conscious of one's capacity to assert a principled independence of that realm. Through pursuing the implications of the thought of finitude, consciousness has been able to assure itself of its intrinsic relation to a non-deceptive God, and thus in a sense transcend that finitude. In the light of this, however, it becomes now a genuine problem to understand how it is that the finite subject, secure in the bosom of the absolute, can ever fall into error. Yet clearly we do--indeed it is in doubt about our capacity to know anything at all that the Cartesian quest began. Despite its function of orientating us toward absolute truth, the recognition of finitude also reaffirms our inherence in the sphere of the senses, of relativity and mortality:

Kierkegaard's "existential dialectic"; even later existence philosophers, for some of whom God <u>is</u> as an <u>absence</u> only, continue to clarify their views on the nature of finite spirit in the light of this absent Infinite.

> I am in a sense something intermediate between God and nought, i.e. placed in such a manner between the Supreme Being and non-being that there is in truth nothing in me that can lead to error in so far as a sovereign Being has formed me; but that, as I in some degree participate likewise in nought, or in non-being, i.e. in so far as I am not myself the Supreme Being and as I find myself subject to an infinitude of imperfections, I ought not to be astonished if I should fall into error.[38]

The "infinitude of imperfections" to which Descartes refers arises because of our dual nature as a thinking and extended being. Insofar as I am a free, self-conscious existent, my knowledge--of myself, of God--is pure. But insofar as I participate in corporeality--express my emotions, use my senses, relate to other sensate beings, etc.--I am "nevertheless subject to an infinitude of errors."[39] We know ourselves perfectly only when detached from the potential deceptions of the senses, within the cogito; so a purely thinking being would never be in error. But consciousness is never in actuality so detached. It is only in relation to the world, to that which is "other," that the thinking self establishes himself as free self-relationality. Having established this freedom, he cannot then submit himself to the restrictions placed upon thought by the natural order, nor yet can he ignore the limits of his finite, corporeal nature, without falling back into skepticism and despair. Thus it is the very oscillation of the self between the recognition of its imperfections and its demand for truth--that movement which characterizes the cogito--which is also the content of the concept of error. Our capacity for error is not therefore a gratuitous lack in us, like the lack of a better brain or of an extra pair of limbs. Rather, "It is a lack of some knowledge which it seems I ought to possess."[40] Far from being a merely contingent fact about being human, the possibility of error seems to be part of our very nature as free, finite subjects--individuals who conceive of the possibility of absolute truth through their awareness of finitude.

[38] Descartes, Meditations, Med. IV, pp. 172-173.

[39] Ibid., p. 172.

[40] Ibid., p. 173.

The "I think" constitutes itself in opposition to all forms of determination or necessity, save that which is grounded in its own activity. It originates in an act of free resolution which establishes its independence from divine authority; it further seeks to safeguard its freedom by asserting the radical epistemological distinction between the sphere of extension and the self-determining simplicity of mind. Yet it is inevitably immersed in finitude--the "infirmity of the self" consists precisely in being constantly confronted by the limits of corporeality. Error--the "misuse of the free will,"[41] occurs when these limits are transgressed, i.e., when I fail to restrain the will, which is "much wider in its range and compass than the understanding"[42] within the boundaries prescribed to the understanding, which has been created finite, and hence fails to comprehend "a multitude of things."[43]

Error, then, like freedom, is essentially bound up with the finitude of human subjectivity. Yet while self-conscious freedom emerges on the basis of the individual's consciousness of finitude, Descartes is more concerned, when exposing the source of error, with man's actual ontological condition as a "finite existent." That I recognize myself as finite, hence as fallible, is one condition of coming to consciousness of my infinite freedom, and thus of the genuine possibility of truth. That I am finite--i.e., limited by nature--is the ontological condition out of which arises the necessity of the possibility of human error.

But what does it mean for the self to be finite? For the self-conscious subject the state of being finite cannot be equivalent to the finitude of the sphere of extension. In relationship to God, indeed, both thinking and extended substance are termed finite; but while that which is extended is "by nature always divisible," the self, equally by nature, is not: "Inasmuch as I am a thinking thing, I cannot distinguish in myself any parts, but apprehend myself to be

[41] Descartes, Meditations, Med. IV, p. 177.

[42] Ibid., p. 175; see also p. 177.

[43] Ibid., p. 177.

clearly one and entire."[44] Yet the simplicity of the self--its capacity to distinguish itself radically, in thought, even from the limits of its own embodiment, does not save it from finitude. For self-consciousness only discovers itself as infinite freedom in and through its very conjunction with corporeality--it is as much a unity of reflective freedom and extended matter as it is their diremption. Thus, while for extended substance, finitude simply means the divisibility and externality of its parts to one another, the ontological condition of human finitude takes up within it both the element of self-conscious freedom--i.e., of infinitude--and the element of finite extensionality. The self is, in its ontological actuality, the unity of these finite and infinite aspects. It is because he thus holds these conflicting elements within himself that Descartes terms the human subject a finite existent, essentially susceptible to error.

Man's capacity for error, then, lies in his ontological status as a being who, on the one hand, must function in relation to the natural order, while on the other he is pure freedom, possessed of a will which

> . . . is infinite because we perceive nothing which may be the object of some other will, even of the immensity of the will that is in God, to which our will cannot also extend.[45]

Dependent on the body for its experience of objects, and upon the mechanistic laws which universally govern extended substance, the self nevertheless seeks constantly to affirm its radical freedom, often, however, employing its "principal perfection"[46] to judge of what it but inadequately knows. Error arises as a result of this dynamic which the self essentially is. As free yet corporeal, the self is always potentially in error, and only achieves knowledge if it continually guards against the will's impetus toward judging that which it does not clearly and distinctly perceive. The

[44] Descartes, Meditations, Med. VI, p. 196.

[45] Descartes, Principles of Philosophy, Principle XXXV, p. 233.

[46] Ibid., Principle XXXVII, p. 233. It is the freedom of the self which Descartes always refers to as constituting man's similitude to God, not his reality as "res cogitans."

reconciliation of a formally infinite free will, which seeks to assert itself without regard to the veracity of its content, with a limited understanding which "extends only to the few objects which present themselves to it,"[47] is the perennial task of Descartes' finite subject.

But if the finite self is the conflict of these two elements, it must also be the source of their possible mediation. The self who perceives itself to be in error must exist potentially in relation to truth, and to gain truth, as we have seen, requires that the abstractly infinite will be constrained within the limits of understanding's experiences. Thus, every occasion when we actually know something becomes an example of an effective resolution of the self's inner conflict, as well as an instance of the cogito's self-transcendence toward the absolute.

The fact of this resolution, however, raises important questions regarding the self who is at once the conflict of will and understanding, and their reconciliation through restraint on the will. Who precisely is this free yet finite individual? Is the self an "unhappy consciousness," to be identified chiefly with the opposition of finite understanding and infinite will? Or does the self's true nature rest with freedom of the will, when it acts independently of understanding? Is the self one with the will which is "of itself indifferent" to the truth or falsity of its content,[48] or with that will which, guided by a clear and distinct understanding, requires no restraint, since it is by no means indifferent to its content? This latter will seems to be free precisely to the degree that it is not indifferent:

> For in order that I should be free it is not necessary that I should be indifferent as to the choice of one or the other of two contraries; but contrariwise, the more I lean to the one . . . the more freely do I choose and embrace it. . . . This indifference which I feel, when I am not swayed to one side rather than to the other by lack of reason, is the lowest grade of liberty, and rather evinces a lack or negation in knowledge rather than a perfection of will: for if I always recognized clearly

[47] Descartes, Principles of Philosophy, Principle XXXV, p. 233.

[48] Descartes, Meditations, Med. IV, p. 176.

> what was true and good, I should never have trouble in deliberating as to what judgment or choice I should make, and then I should be entirely free without ever being indifferent.[49]

The free will whose infinity marks it as one with the absolute, then, cannot be an abstract indefinite power of choice, whose arbitrariness alone distinguishes it from the mechanistically-determined order of extension. The will is truly free, for Descartes, when it is determined by reason, i.e., when it is a rational will. The merely abstract, indifferent power to choose, judge, or act "freely," while "infinite,"[50] appears from this perspective to be simply a lower order of willing, which lacks that unity with self-conscious reason which alone could constitute it as genuine freedom. Thus, the inner necessity which inclines the self to affirm what the understanding apprehends clearly and distinctly is here indicated as the ground of its very autonomy. The true freedom of the self, then, lies in its capacity to unify the infinitely active will with a receptive, finite understanding, through the power of self-conscious thought. The free resolve to doubt absolutely, i.e., to will an infinite deceiver, and the necessity whereby the self cannot help but affirm the truth of its clear and distinct ideas, are twin instances of the self's initial, original capacity for rational freedom. In contrast stands that "infinite" skepticism which remains locked within itself, holding aloof from choice, or choosing its objects arbitrarily, "wilfully." Such skepticism indeed sees itself as genuine freedom, but the skepticism of Descartes' radical doubt overtakes this freedom of mere indifference in the interest of a concrete relationship between the thinking self and truth.

The fulcrum of the Cartesian turn to subjectivity, as we have seen, is the freedom manifested in hyperbolical doubt. In arriving at knowledge of the cogito as a concrete unity of being and thinking, Descartes at the same time recognizes the essential and originary

[49] Descartes, Meditations, Med. IV, p. 175 [emphasis mine].

[50] Its "infinity" is its formal capacity to will any content, regardless of its truth or falsity. The understanding does not of itself judge the truth or falsity of its contents, but needs the will to fulfill this function.

unity of thought and freedom: there is no pure act of self-awareness in the absence of freedom, no genuine freedom which is devoid of self-conscious reflection. The inclining of the will through reason is thus, for Descartes, no externally imposed constraint, but the very model of self-determination.

Although Descartes views the thinking self as essentially free--genuine freedom therefore being ontologically identified with thinking substance[51]--he nevertheless also speaks of the self as a finite substance, and so capable of falling "into error and sin" through choosing "the evil for the good, or the false for the true."[52] Such choices constitute a misuse of the self's fundamental freedom.

But this distinction between action in accordance with rational freedom and action in which the will abuses its freedom seems to imply a split between the essential subjectivity and rationality of Descartes himself and the freedom of his will, which, like the understanding, is a faculty under his control:

> But if I determine to deny or affirm, I no longer make use as I should of my free will, and if I affirm what is not true, it is evident that I deceive myself; even though I judge according to truth, this comes about only by chance, and I do not escape the blame of misusing my freedom . . . .[53]

While it is not incoherent to say that an individual can freely misuse his understanding, it is difficult to see how Descartes, who has identified selfhood with rational freedom, can also say that he can

[51] This view that freedom is the central ontological characteristic of human being has of course shaped much contemporary existence philosophy. One finds its most extreme formulation in the thought of J.-P. Sartre, for whom man is "condemned to be free." Sartrean freedom, unlike that of Descartes, is marked by a negativity, an abstract infinitude, such that it transcends and determines the value of all other human activities, including the activity of thinking itself.

[52] Descartes, Meditations, Med. IV, p. 176.

[53] Ibid. [Emphases mine]. Although it must be emphasized that for Sartre, reason and freedom are not essentially united in man, the parallel between Descartes and Sartre on this particular matter is in some respects noteworthy. For instance, Sartre speaks of "bad faith" as an inauthentic use of freedom, not as a failure to act freely--thus implying a distinction within the ontologically free self analogous to that made by Descartes. Further, for both, such a misuse of freedom is possible because the subject is capable of self-deception.

freely misuse the faculty of willing--that he can freely choose to affirm, if not the false, at least the uncertain. If this is indeed his meaning, then either (paradoxically, it would seem) his rational will freely prevents itself from acting freely, or else there is implied here a distinction between a lower and higher order of will, such that only the higher can be identified with the rational thinking self.

The latter possibility certainly seems to be confirmed in those passages where Descartes describes the infinite, yet of itself indifferent will, as easily falling into error or sin, unless restrained by Descartes himself, who alone judges as to the proper relationship between the infinite will and the finite powers of the understanding. It is also Descartes, as essentially thinking selfhood, who resolutely restrains the "lower" will's impetuous tendency to independent action, and who is blameworthy when that resolution fails to contain the will's infinite scope.

There is no doubt much confusion surrounding Descartes' employment of the concepts of will, of freedom, and of selfhood.[54] It can be seen, however, that while he does not fully explore or work out the difficult implications of these complex interrelationships, Descartes' insights are seminal elements in the genesis of the contemporary problem of finite subjectivity.

The significance of these insights can hardly be exaggerated. The view that the subject is originally and essentially free rationality is the explicit basis for Kant's critique of dogmatic metaphysics and empiricist skepticism, for his justification of morality, and thus for his characterization of the self as a dweller in two conflicting worlds. The recognition that the self is also finite, bound to a corporeal existence which pervades its every

[54] For a careful and very illuminating handling of Descartes' treatment of these relationships, see Frederick Broadie, An Approach to Descartes' Meditations (London: The Athlone Press, 1970), Ch. 4. Broadie considers in detail Descartes' problematic oscillations among several views of the link between free will and rational selfhood and examines his consequent uncertainty as to whether it is himself, or his "faculty of willing," who is truly God-like, i.e., autonomous and infinite, in its activity.

thought and experience, and possessed therefore of a limited understanding, contributes equally to the view of the self as a being who faces in two opposing directions, but who can be exclusively identified with neither. The Kantian synthesis of these twin aspects of subjectivity, i.e., rational freedom and finitude, found expression in the polar concepts of transcendental and empirical subjectivity, and of the phenomenal and noumenal selves. But while his radical method of accounting for this synthesis reconciled some contradictions inherent in the Cartesian appreciation of subjectivity, it also confronted philosophers with newer, and perhaps even more intractible, difficulties.

Existential thinkers in particular found the Kantian (and Cartesian) identification of freedom and reason symptomatic of a view of the self which thrust aside issues such as the concrete responsibilities and projects of particular individuals, in the interest of a universal, abstract rationality and a merely theoretical freedom. Nevertheless, it must be said that without the initial turn toward subjectivity found in the Cartesian intuition of the unity of reason and freedom, of thinking and being, there is no context within which existence philosophy's reconsideration of the notion of finite subjectivity could emerge or develop. That these Cartesian principles lent themselves to the criticism and reinterpretations of subsequent metaphysics, and were later absorbed within the more subtle distinctions of transcendental idealism, does not detract from the fundamental significance which the Cartesian starting-point maintains with respect to current existence philosophy's goals and results.

4. Foundations of an Existential Critique of the Cogito

If there is a central problem which all existence philosophy traces back to Cartesianism, then it is the separation of theory and practice which underlies Descartes' notion of the self. The cogito is a knowing subject--and free will emerges in relationship to this knower's capacity concretely to unify subjective certainty and objective truth. Descartes frequently dissociates the freedom revealed in the Meditations from the practical freedom presupposed

by an ethical agent.[55] Man's essence is to think, and thus to be free; but this freedom cannot be assumed to operate equally within the natural order, an order which includes even the body of a thinking being, which can clearly and distinctly be seen to be radically other than the free, thinking self,[56] and furthermore functions according to mechanistic principles. The only sense in which action is indubitably free is in the "action" peculiar to the judgments--affirmations and denials--of the thinking self.

But if the will, when guided by the clear and distinct perception of the mind, is invariably free, and if it is only when so determined that it is truly free, then what is one to say about those situations in which action is demanded, and no clear and distinct rational guidelines are available--in fact about the majority of situations in which ethical decisions are called for? Descartes seems not to demand the same indubitable basis for human practice as he does for theoretical pursuits. Early in the Discourse on the Method he lays down provisional maxims for the ethic he intends to govern his life while engaged upon his search for indubitable knowledge:

> My second maxim was that of being as firm and resolute in my actions as I could be, and not to follow less faithfully opinions the most dubious, when my mind was once made up regarding them, than if these had been beyond doubt.[57]

Now this is indeed a useful principle for one who wishes to be unencumbered with ethical or practical concerns while intent on theoretical ones, but it nevertheless injects a note of profound ambiguity into his subsequent reflections. His conclusion in Meditation IV is that "the light of nature teaches us that the knowledge of the understanding should always precede the determination of the will,"[58] yet it is hard to see how this can be universally

[55] Descartes, Reply to the Second Set of Objections, pp. 41-42.

[56] Descartes, Meditations, Med. VI, p. 190.

[57] Descartes, Discourse on the Method, p. 96.

[58] Descartes, Meditations, Med. IV, p. 176 [emphasis mine].

affirmed, if a fundamental exception is made of the will when it pertains to practical matters. For how can the will which is truly free only when determined by thought be the same will which was pronounced capable of deciding "firmly and resolutely" in the teeth of the most dubitable of information? If indubitable knowledge is the sole adequate foundation upon which the will may be determined, if indeed freedom and thinking are profoundly unified, then on what basis can the "firmness and resolution" equally needed for practical willing be grounded? On occasions when one lacks clear and distinct knowledge, how is one ever to make a genuinely free ethical decision?

This is in fact the burden of an objection raised by one of Descartes' contemporaries, Fr. Mersenne, who feared that, if the will always requires clear and distinct knowledge before it can choose freely, then " . . . there will be practically nothing which the will may permissibly embrace," and cautions him "lest, in your desire to befriend the truth, you do not prove too much, and instead of establishing it, overthrow it."[59] Mersenne is not objecting to the basic thesis that we ought, ideally, to be guided by certain knowledge in our actions.[60] Rather, he is arguing that in the concern firmly to establish the crucial equation between thinking and freedom, Descartes may be illegitimately narrowing the sphere of human experience. The essence of human reality, he is suggesting, may not be exhausted in the concept of a thinking (free) subject, so that perhaps we should more broadly characterize freedom, not simply in relation to theoretical, but also to practical willing. Unless this is admitted, Descartes' insistence upon the bond between rational certainty and freedom seems to imply that human action is not integrally related to human thought.

When contemporary philosophers of existence criticize the paradigm of the self as pure thinking substance, they echo these early objections. To unite human action and theoretical consciousness within the inclusive category of finite subjectivity, and to

[59] Father Mersenne, "The Second Set of Objections," in The Philosophical Works of Descartes, Vol. II, p. 28.

[60] Although Descartes interprets the objection in this way. Ibid., p. 43.

establish that subjectivity firmly on the basis of freedom, is a project whose success, they argue, depends upon a radical revision of traditional meanings for "knowing" and "freedom." If knowing requires always a foundation in apodictic certainty, then clearly most human action occurs independently of knowledge, and the self becomes a divided subject who is both a rational, free thinker and the pawn of external, natural forces devoid of freedom or reason. The desire to resolve this duality at the heart of human subjectivity is one of the guiding principles behind the existential claim that the finite subject is one who exists freely, but in concrete relationship to his world.

Descartes' reply to Mersenne's objection reiterates his sharp distinction between our practical and theoretical endeavours:

> . . . in matters that may be embraced by the will, I made a very strict distinction between practical life and the contemplation of truth. For to the extent to which the practical life is involved, so far am I from thinking that assent must be given only to what is clearly seen, that on the contrary, I believe that we need not always expect to find even probable truths there; rather it is often the case that we must choose one out of a number of alternatives about which we are quite ignorant, and cleave to this none the less firmly after we have decided for it, as long as no arguments hostile to it can be entertained, than if it had been selected for reasons of the highest evidence . . . .[61]

The role he assigns to the will in practical matters seems here diametrically opposed to its function in pursuing theoretical truth. The freedom open to the practical will is of a solely negative order--as long as no arguments can be advanced against a choice, then we ought to affirm it as resolutely as we affirm the positive truths of reason. Yet the freedom of the will, as we saw above, was bound up with the clarity of the mind's perception of truth, not simply with the absence of obvious falsehood, so it is difficult to see how such negative choices could be genuine acts of freedom, or why one would be motivated to "resolutely affirm" them.[62] One

[61] Descartes, Reply to the Second Set of Objections, p. 44; see also Discourse on the Method, p. 96.

[62] Descartes' provisional maxim is justified in practice, he goes on to say (Discourse on the Method, p. 96), by the fact that only by sticking to a hypothesis until it is proved wrong will we

might be tempted to conclude that the "resolve" of the practical will does not participate in that unity of reason and freedom characteristic of self-conscious existence, but rather reflects an arbitrary, personal selection of ends, but abstractly and negatively guided by a merely technical rationality.

Descartes' own comments seem to support this conclusion. While he often says that it is self-evident that man is free, and that therefore " . . . it is the greatest perfection in man to be able to act by its [the will's] means . . . and by so doing we are in a peculiar way masters of our actions and thereby merit praise or blame . . .,"[63] these affirmations usually occur in the context of the problem of intellectual error, rather than of moral matters. Thus, for instance, we are praiseworthy, not when we act virtuously, but "when we choose what is true,"[64] i.e., when we do not err in our efforts to acquire knowledge. This kind of intellectualist ethic may be applied, of course, in cases where one can make a clear and distinct judgment about what is good (i.e., true), but as Descartes himself says, such instances are few in the murky context of practical life, so that the resolve to act virtuously--if virtue is contingent upon genuine knowledge--must often remain merely a resolve. In a letter to the Princess Elizabeth, in 1645, Descartes reaffirms the provisional morality he had set forth in the Discourse on the Method, but with a noteworthy change of emphasis:

> The first rule is to try always, as best one can, to know what one ought to do or ought not to do in all the occurrences of life. The second, that one have a firm and constant resolution to do all which reason counsels, without being turned aside by the passions or the appetites. It is the firmness of this resolution, that I believe must be taken as virtue . . . .[65]

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be able to decide whether it is right or wrong. This, however, does not obviate the difficulty of the motivation for the original selection of some particular hypothesis toward which the will is not inclined through reason.

[63] Descartes, Principles of Philosophy, Principle XXXVII, pp. 233-234.

[64] Ibid.

[65] Descartes, a letter to Princess Elizabeth, in Oeuvres de Descartes, Vol. IV, ed., C. Adam and P. Tannery (Paris: J. Vrin, 1972), p. 265.

Thus while the need for relating thought and freedom remains evident, it is not in the rational content of one's actions that virtue is said to lie, but rather in the "firmness of this resolution" to heed reason--even if that resolution, one supposes, cannot be actualized in the recalcitrant sphere of extension.

Cartesian "resolution" grows out of the sense that the thinking self and the world of extension are ultimately disparate realities. In the sphere of human action, extension--my bodily nature, and the corporeality of the social and physical world--plays a central role; yet, for Descartes, extended substance is the absolutely "other" for human consciousness, and as such a context where genuine knowledge is rarely possible. The extended world can be rationalized through the discipline of human reason, of science and mathematics, but in matters of ethical conduct similar certainty is difficult to achieve. The conclusion looms, then, that since freedom and knowledge are so intrinsically bound up, the possibility of freedom functioning in human practice is equally precarious. The virtue of resignation assumes importance, as Descartes speaks with sympathy of the ancient Stoics' ethical position, when formulating his own provisional morality:

> My third maxim was to try always to conquer myself rather than fortune, and to alter my desires rather than change the order of the world, and generally accustom myself to believe that there is nothing entirely within our power but our own thoughts: . . . and I believe it is principally in this that is to be found the secret of those philosophers who, in ancient times, were able to free themselves from the empire of fortune . . . .[66]

For Descartes, as for the Stoics, freedom rested with self-conscious thought, so that those who had "so absolute a mastery over their thoughts" could count themselves "more free and more happy than other men."[67] The world of extension, the natural and objective order, inevitably subdues those who would find their freedom therein. Ultimately, it seems, what one <u>does</u> is no adequate measure of one's freedom or virtue, whereas the firmness of resolution to preserve one's rational integrity, even if only negatively, is such a measure.

This emphasis upon the free, resolute intention of the individual

[66] Descartes, <u>Discourse on the Method</u>, pp. 96-97.

will becomes a recurrent theme in post-Cartesian philosophies. Thus, Descartes' virtuous resolution to act in accordance with reason, or at least not against it, has something in common with the Kantian principles that only the good will is good in itself, and that freedom lies in the intention to act rationally, i.e., for the sake of duty. But most interesting, from our present perspective, is the importance many existentialist thinkers attach to that attitude of "resolve" which characterizes--or ought to characterize--the existing, finite subject who must act in the world.[68] Existential freedom, they assert, is radically distinct from the detached, epistemological freedom of the Cartesian cogito. It is a freedom-in-finitude, an attitude of the ethical subject who finds himself essentially involved in his situation, and must choose authentically from within it. But if the cogito and the finite subject are so radically opposed, whence comes the mutual stress upon the value of the individual's firm resolution to act virtuously (authentically)? What is the relationship between the contemporary rejection of the ideal of metaphysical truth and the Cartesian search for absolute certainties, such that both hold the subjective act of free resolve in philosophical esteem? To begin answering this question, we must briefly consider the central intention of Descartes' turn to subjectivity, and the way this intention was reinterpreted by subsequent thinkers. Perhaps then the stress laid on the finite subject's "free resolve" will appear in a less ambiguous light.

5. Cartesian and Existential Responses to the Problem of Skepticism

If Descartes' turn to the authority of the cogito signified a rejection of "otherworldly" or external principles as a basis for

[68] This term has in fact become a basic category of existence philosophy. It can be found in varying forms in Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Sartre, Camus, and Jaspers, for instance, while in the work of Heidegger it is employed frequently and explicitly, as the ontological category of "Entschlossenheit."

human knowledge, it did not constitute a rejection of metaphysics as such. His Meditations on First Philosophy were precisely that--skeptical reflections designed to safeguard our access to metaphysical and scientific truths forever, by placing responsibility for their acceptance in human reason itself. It has been justly remarked that

> Descartes' metaphysics is a catharsis for the fear that we do not stand in an organic relationship to reality. The metaphysics ends when this fear ends, and when a weight of uncertainty has been counter-balanced by a weight of evidence. It is not, like Thomistic metaphysics, born out of a confidence that man is at home in the universe, but out of a dread that he is not. It is a metaphysic the aim of which is to justify metaphysics.[69]

But while Descartes established to his satisfaction that the Newtonian universe of mechanically interactive bodies could remain a home for that being whose free, self-conscious thought actualizes itself in opposition to the sphere of extension, those who inherited the Cartesian standpoint saw the profound difficulties to which this "justification of metaphysics" was prey.

Descartes' firm resolution to adhere to the certainties of reason, and the value he places on maintaining this resolve, even when knowledge is least assured, is linked with his fundamental project--to overcome skepticism by grounding human experience on a bedrock of truth. Although the originary freedom of self-consciousness established itself in opposition to both God and nature, thus opening the way for a radical dualism of mind and body, of unitary selfhood and complex, extended nature, Cartesian metaphysics itself remains equally dedicated to integrating those very rifts which it creates. Thus, his ethical perspective, and the importance he attaches to will and freedom, must always be seen in the light of this overarching determination to unite human subjectivity and objective truth. Resolution is necessary, even in cases where knowledge eludes us, precisely because knowledge always remains the goal of human thought and practice. Thus, a resolution is never held or valued simply for its own sake. The notion of "risk" also takes its

[69] Marthinus Versfeld, An Essay on the Metaphysics of Descartes (Washington and New York: Kennikat Press Inc., 1969), pp. 51-52.

meaning from this context. The individual risks himself, in theoretical or practical pursuits, only to the degree that he is ignorant. What he risks is falling into error, a state which usually accompanies actions undertaken in the ethical sphere.[70] It must be the constant aim of the individual to avoid such risk-taking, by seeking to guide his actions by the epistemological certainties in which alone genuine freedom arises.

In contrast to this image of man as struggling to reduce the risk of error through a firmly resolute quest for epistemological certainties, the existentialist's "finite subject" is portrayed as essentially a risk-taker. His firmness of resolve is directed not toward achieving rational certainty, but toward authentic action, performed in the face of profound uncertainty. Resolve is here equated with individual freedom, but it is deeply divided from that unity with reason characteristic of its Cartesian usage. This attitude is formulated in opposition to the entire post-Cartesian project of unifying subjective consciousness and objective nature through the resolute activity of reason. It preserves Descartes' insight into the freedom of self-consciousness, while maintaining that modern skepticism--the fear that "we do not stand in an organic relationship to reality"--can never be eliminated through the pursuit of absolute rational truth.

Modern philosophy has always somehow involved attempts to banish this form of skepticism. Hume finally concluded that skepticism must be accepted as the human condition, while Kant sought to insure both human thought and action against this fate by presenting the subject as relating to the world from two independent perspectives. But the existentialist answer to the skeptic is to deny the validity of the problem itself. We become skeptical, it is argued, because we take as our starting-point the separation of the subject who thinks and the world upon which he reflects. But as soon as one deliberately seeks metaphysical proof of the unity of consciousness and being, then that very undertaking becomes itself a continuous reinforcement of the irreducible duality of mind and nature. Categories like

[70] Descartes, Reply to the Second Set of Objections, pp. 43-44.

"resolution," in such a context, can only describe human freedom in its pursuit of rational certainties, while the concretely ethical significance of free individuality becomes subordinated to the requirements of epistemology. The freedom of human action in the world appears of little moment, and the illusion that skepticism can be transcended continues to promote the proliferation of metaphysical systems.

But the problem of skepticism can be avoided if the integrity, rather than the separation, of the subject and his world forms the starting-point for philosophy. Existentialism regards the finite subject--the individual who acts freely, yet within the limits of his personal and historical life-world--as "proof" that skepticism is a pseudo-problem. Even in his philosophizing, the subject is characterized by the recognition that he cannot expect to overcome the limitations of his finitude. Thus, aware that absolute knowledge is in principle beyond his grasp, he freely resolves to act within his finite situation, rather than to try vainly to transcend it through rational certainties. Unlike the Cartesian resolve to avoid risk of error, the resolution of the finite subject takes the form of courageous risk, since it is undertaken upon the ruins of previous efforts to ground subjective freedom in rational truth. In the face of the "shipwreck"[71] of reason's ambitions, the individual resolves no longer to seek certainty, but rather to make ethical choices on the basis of his inherence in a finite, given situation. The philosopher, the thinker, is here then absorbed within the category of the ethically existing agent, for whom finitude and freedom of action form the parameters in which an "authentic," rather than an epistemologically guaranteed, truth is realized.

The true philosopher, modelled now upon the ethical individual, is a risk-taker in two respects. He is one who refuses to find support for his thinking in the extant conclusions of traditional metaphysics, and thus refuses to submit his individual freedom to

[71] This dramatic existential epithet first appears in the work of Søren Kierkegaard, for whom individual existence is "the category upon which pure thought must suffer shipwreck." See Søren Kierkegaard, Concluding Unscientific Postscript, trans., David F. Swenson (1941; rpt. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 278.

the objective results of earlier philosophers. But even more important, his activity will be a risk in the sense that he rejects, in advance, not only the conclusions of the skeptic, but even the basic goal of overcoming skepticism through thought which has motivated traditional metaphysics. Thus, "authentic" philosophizing always takes place in an atmosphere of "fear and trembling," since the thinker himself can alone justify the conclusions he draws, or decide whether, indeed, his conclusions are of the sort requiring justification.

In marked contrast to the Cartesian metaphysician, then, such a philosopher adopts an attitude of resolve in defiance of the very aim of overcoming skepticism, rather than as a means to its attainment. The freedom expressed in the act of resolution is itself the focus of the philosopher's attention, and not those metaphysical truths which the appropriate use of this freedom reveals, as within Cartesianism. The existing philosopher, as a finite subject, must regard himself primarily as an ethical agent, for whom, in accordance with the dictates of his freedom, metaphysical truth may or may not become of philosophical concern, rather than as a metaphysican who must consider ethical matters. As first and foremost an ethically existing individual, he integrates those poles of subjectivity and being which metaphysical thought perpetually draws asunder. By beginning from man as an agent, rather than as thinker, from man as "finite subjectivity" rather than as self-conscious reflection, existential philosophy hopes to unify those abstractions which have beset the progress of modern thought.

Can this existentialist critique of contemporary forms of "dehumanization," its replacement of the abstract, reflective cogito with a concrete finite subjectivity, unify thought and action, originally separated in Cartesian philosophizing? Kant's transcendental critique already sought to reconcile the theoretical and practical aspects of human experience, i.e., the self as knower and agent, by grounding both in the unity of self-conscious reason. Nevertheless, we live today with a fragmentation of philosophical perspectives, coupled with the ascendancy of a burgeoning scientific technology--a situation reminiscent of the metaphysical disputes and scientific successes which provoked Kant's efforts to alay skepticism

and safeguard morality. The "finite subject" must be viewed, then, not only as a reinterpretation of the cogito--an interpretation which preserves the Cartesian recognition of self-conscious freedom as the starting-point for thought and action, while seeking release from the skeptical implications of his dualism. It is equally a critical response to Kant's transcendental subjectivity. For while the transcendental ego emerges from a radical inquiry into the very possibility of knowledge, rather than serving, like the cogito, as the presupposition of metaphysical truth, existentialists argue that, unlike the notion of a "finite subjectivity," it retains a degree of abstractness which prevents the individual self from participating concretely in reality.

Whether, and how, one can transcend the skeptical impasse to which modern thought seems to lead, through a radical realignment of traditional concepts and values, is the general question motivating the complex development of contemporary existential philosophies. Underlying the existential critique of traditional metaphysics is a refined sensitivity to the incongruities within contemporary culture, and a determination to expose the contradictions upon which our ambiguous self-image rests. It is in the interest of restoring a lost unity between man as a free, ethical being and the world in which his actions arise and terminate, that existence philosophers so frequently present their views against the background of the Cartesian and Kantian visions of subjectivity.[72] For if it is in these philosophies that the dualisms which have generated the contemporary crisis are most starkly propounded, then, existentialists argue, their perspective is the one we must leave behind if such metaphysical dualism is to be overcome.

One of the central questions the present study will address is

[72] Although the problems of metaphysical speculation come to a head with Kant and his idealist successors, this unity, many existentialists argue, was already lost with the decline of Greek civilization. A yearning toward the integrity of thought and action characteristic of Greek culture thus appears in many existential writings: Kierkegaard looks upon Socrates as his model of the authentic man and philosopher, Nietzsche sought his ideals in Greek religion and culture, while for Heidegger, the entire post-Socratic tradition has been a decline.

the relationship the existentialist notion of finite subjectivity has to that tradition which it seeks to reject. Does the substitution of the philosopher as an "authentically existing individual" for the philosopher as metaphysician and epistemologist provide an adequate resolution for the difficulties inherent in modern thought? Is it possible to reveal concrete finite subjectivity as a radical new category, comprehensive of all the vital aspects of human self-experience, or does this perspective, apparently founded upon a revolutionary basis, owe essential debts to traditional thinking, which cannot be lightly left out of account?

Man's conflicting awareness of himself as an utterly contingent element within the natural order, and as a free subject who somehow transcends that order, forms the contemporary framework within which the existentialist vision of finite subjectivity arises. It is important, therefore, to reflect upon how the existence philosopher sees this contradiction as emerging from the Cartesian origins of modern thought, and then, briefly, to trace the elements of Cartesian dualism through their transformation within the Kantian synthesis. In this way we may clarify somewhat which of the conclusions of traditional metaphysics and epistemology elicit existence philosophy's deepest concern, and which have become absorbed within the new category of finite subjectivity.

The particular dualisms that infect contemporary culture, so goes the general existential view, arise with the very genesis of Cartesian philosophy. At the same time as he originates a method for "rightly conducting reason"--a method intended to deliver us from skepticism, and to make possible the translation of the contingent, natural order into rational, scientific, and mathematical terms--Descartes fosters an even profounder skepticism with regard to the possibility of virtuous action. If mathematical truth becomes the criterion of all truth, i.e., if it is for reflective understanding to bring about the union of subjectivity and the world, then clearly the role of human practice is severely diminished from the outset. The sphere of genuinely free human action, once equated with the sphere where precise, quantitative knowledge is possible, becomes the province of abstract thinkers, conducting objective investigations of the external world. But in thus

recognizing and "practising" the freedom of self-consciousness, such a thinker reaffirms with every new truth gained the corresponding presupposition of a separation between the self and the objective world which he knows. The objective order is not a human order--it is radically other, determined by mechanistic laws, rather than the principle of self-conscious freedom. Paradoxically, this otherness deepens as our rationalization of its content proceeds. Freedom of thought, in Descartes' intention, makes possible both man's unity with and mastery over the world beyond consciousness. Yet the form this mastery takes is an abstract one, permitting no integration of practice and thought within our actual existence. It is a mastery which succeeds at the expense of that very human freedom which is its original presupposition.

Implicit in Descartes' affirmation of the freedom of the subject, then, existentialists argue, is a view of nature, the implications of which are highly equivocal. On the one hand, self-conscious freedom becomes the touchstone for truth, so that the hold of external authority, divine or human, gives way to the authority of human reason itself. However, this same rational freedom provides the metaphysical underpinning for a vision of nature as a radically non-human--unconscious, unfree--dimension. The Newtonian universe, that system of passive bodies, interacting in accordance with causal laws, had no room for man, except insofar as he, too, participated in the functioning of the vast, inanimate machine. Descartes' separation of freedom and extension, even within the human individual himself, makes it possible to study this universe in the certainty of achieving knowledge, while, at the same time, necessarily excluding man's thoughts and projects from any significant role in the universe thus studied. Contemporaries such as Pascal pointed out the consequences of Descartes' "denaturation" of human reason and freedom, arguing that the pre-Cartesian view that man belonged essentially within an orderly cosmos reflected more truly his freedom and dignity. Yet the sense of alienation, of metaphysical homelessness implicit in the new perspective, did not become the central concern for philosophy until the relationships between subjectivity and freedom, knowing and practice, had been much more thoroughly explored, and traditional philosophy's latent nihilism became evident.

This, then, is the crux of the existentialist response to Descartes: on the one hand, fundamental insights of Cartesian metaphysics are preserved, indeed form the very basis of the existence philosopher's enterprise; on the other, these insights are often transfigured under the pressure of the new style of questioning which appears along with the Cartesian starting-point itself. To fully appreciate the significance existence philosophy attaches to its turn to finite subjectivity, we must briefly consider this post-Cartesian mode of philosophizing, noting the way divergent aspects within Descartes' metaphysics were stressed by those who emulated his approach. The working out of these apparently contradictory elements laid the basis for the problems addressed by Kant's transcendental idealism, so that in the critical philosophy we find further preparation for that thinking which now proposes the finite subject as the central theme for contemporary philosophizing.

6. Pre-Kantian Assessments of the Cogito

Even as it shifted all subsequent philosophy to a new plane, the Cartesian cogito and the metaphysics which it supported became the source for mutually conflicting philosophical perspectives. The insight that consciousness is the sole appropriate starting-point for future metaphysics was generally adopted by philosophers following Descartes, but the significance of this accomplishment his successors construed in diverse ways. The philosophies which developed upon the foundation of the cogito were of a different order than the earlier metaphysics. Whereas previous thinkers had directly pursued truth about Being itself, on the assumption that such knowledge was possible, the new metaphysician incorporated an essential element of skepticism within his approach, by demanding that truth always henceforth be legitimized in consciousness itself. His goal remained knowledge of Being, but of Being insofar as it constitutes a content adequate to thought. The initial concern of such a philosopher, then, is to reveal the basic epistemological principles which can verify consciousness' experience and render it genuinely objective to the knowing subject. What is sought is a criterion of objectivity which

will enable the thinker to comprehend reality as a rationally determinable, objective order of truth. The search begins from within the standpoint of the cogito, with the attempt to discern the fundamental principle of self-evidence which will provide an absolute basis for a systematic knowledge of Being, so that epistemology supplanted traditional metaphysical reflections.

But the self-evidence now demanded as the basis for knowledge could be sought in a number of directions, as the array of philosophies all claiming the Cartesian perspective as their own revealed. The chief requirement was that the principle selected as the criterion for objectivity reflect the self-certainty of the cogito. But given the ambiguities of Descartes' original formulation, the content of the principle seemed open to interpretation. In the Meditations Descartes presents his journey to the thought of the cogito as the progress of an individual, himself, toward the recognition that within personal, contingent selfhood is discoverable the absolute ground for knowledge. The cogito is an accomplishment open in principle to each particular individual, as long as he is willing to make the effort of thought and study its achievement demands. At the same time, its essential meaning is that the individual thereby transcends personal egohood through self-conscious identification with reason as such. The free participation and resolve of individual consciousness is a necessary condition for the recognition of the universality of self-conscious reason, so that at its very origins, the cogito appears as both personal, empirical selfhood and the identification of that selfhood with universal rationality.

It seems possible to approach the question of the criterion of self-evidence from two different perspectives, then, which are commonly termed the empiricist and rationalist approaches. The empiricist style of philosophizing takes its starting-point from the possibility of interpreting "self-evidence" as the immediate relationship between individual consciousness and that which is "given" to it. Descartes had indeed said that all such immediate experiences, whatever their particular origin or content, were absolutely valid when taken purely as modes of consciousness.[73]

[73] Descartes, Principles of Philosophy, Principle IX, p. 22.

The principle of objectivity could thus be located in that which presents itself directly to consciousness. Such content bears in itself the stamp of objectivity: it has not been mediated by complex operations of the understanding or imagination, so that if we restrict knowing to such immediate givenness, referring all thought and experience ultimately to it, one fulfills the Cartesian precept of avoiding "otherworldly" forms of philosophizing, since one refuses to go beyond that which consciousness, in its most concrete form, can verify.

Thus, while empiricism agrees with Descartes' turn toward subjectivity, it equates subjectivity with particular, individual consciousness, and therefore bases objectivity upon those experiences immediately accessible to such a consciousness. But post-Cartesian empiricism, despite its characteristic emphasis upon common sense, and the primacy of the individual's perceptual experiences, is not essentially a realist philosophy. It starts, as does Cartesianism, from consciousness itself, and is thus "idealistic" in the sense that it begins not with "things themselves"--as does, for instance, the scholastic metaphysics of Being--but with experience, insofar as it is determinable by individual consciousness, or as John Locke calls it, the "understanding."

Lockean empiricism emulates the Cartesian intention to refrain from all metaphysics until the capacity of thought to know reality has been ascertained. But in treating the understanding as his object, Locke nevertheless makes certain metaphysical assumptions which arise out of his fundamental acceptance and particular interpretation of Descartes' starting-point. To avoid metaphysical presuppositions, he argued, one must begin with what is immediately evident to ordinary consciousness. Thus he takes as absolutely valid the experience of particular, finite individuals, whom "it is past doubt . . . have in their minds several ideas."[74] This view that subjectivity is equatable with particular individuality only, and that the foundation of knowledge therefore rests upon immediate psychological certainties, is a view which, while it shares Descartes'

[74] John Locke, Essay Concerning Human Understanding (London: J. F. Dove, 1928), Book II, Ch. I, p. 60.

resolve to ground truth in human consciousness, departs from his rather complex appreciation of "consciousness." The particular individual has an essential role in knowing, for Descartes, since responsibility lies with each rational person to undertake the pursuit of truth. But this stress on individuality does not express the full significance of the cogito, wherein personal subjectivity necessarily relates itself to the universal. Thus, the empiricist preserves Descartes' idealistic paradigm, but interprets the cogito as particular psychological selfhood, and views knowledge as resting upon the immediately given content of the empirical individual's experience. Descartes' Meditations, while autobiographical in style, nevertheless claim to lead the individual back to the universality of reason itself. The "historical plain method" which Locke uses to "give . . . account of the ways whereby our understandings come to attain these notions of things we have . . .,"[75] seeks, however, to explain the "origin of ideas" at an entirely psychological level. Unlike Descartes, he assumes in advance the discrete reality of our several individual consciousnesses and personalities--"our understandings"--and then describes the genesis of the ideas we eventually acquire through experience, which is the sole self-validating source of knowledge. Implied in his rejection of "innate ideas" is a denial that any content or perspective can be universally attributed to consciousness as such. Rather, each mind is a blank sheet, upon which may be inscribed whatever ideas happen to reach it through its particular experiences. If knowledge is ever universal, it is because it refers only to those abstract "ideas of reflection" which have their source in the mind's pure reflectivity, apart from perceptual experiences. Truly certain knowledge of reality, however, must be founded upon our immediate sensations, i.e., the "simple ideas" comprising experience.

This mode of philosophizing, then, defines subjectivity so narrowly that certainty can be attributed only to the activity of the individual psyche in its most simple relationships to its content. But so long as such individual experience is thus the final

[75] Locke, Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Book I, Ch. 1, p. 13.

arbiter of truth, it becomes clear to later thinkers that it remains impossible to develop a universally valid science of reality, or, equally, a universal morality. The crucial moment of concrete individual subjectivity is thus here asserted at the expense of the dimension of universality which equally characterized the cogito, so that empirical generalization replaces necessary law or universal truth as the goal and content of knowledge and practice.

Combined with this idealist stress on the role of consciousness is a realism which identifies consciousness with the empirical--psychological and physical--history of the individual. This same uneasy alliance of realism and idealism is also evident in Locke's characterization of the relationship between consciousness and the world, where a further metaphysical assumption guides the course of reflection. Straightaway adopting Descartes' dualism of two substances, he sees reality as constituted by minds and body, or extension. We cannot, however, directly know these substances, since, faithful to his idealist presupposition, Locke argues that we have verifiable access only to our own states of mind, or ideas. Any awareness we have of the world beyond consciousness comes through images which somehow mirror the external world of bodies. But if this is so, how can we know that there is physical substance at all? Given the idealist assumption, it becomes difficult to maintain the common-sense belief that our ideas actually do refer to an objective reality which causes them. Yet Locke claims that, at least where our most fundamental, simplest ideas are concerned, we are in genuine contact with reality: " . . . simple ideas, which . . . the mind can by no means make to itself, must necessarily be the product of things operating on the mind in a natural way . . . ."[76] Justification for this view, however, is entirely lacking, and substance remains for Locke a "something, I know not what" which he nevertheless is unable to discard.

This empiricist development of Cartesian subjectivity presents difficulties which will ultimately form part of Kant's problematic. If the concrete, psychological self is made the sole basis of knowing and of morality, then universality can no longer be the criterion for

[76] Locke, Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Book IV, Ch. 4, p. 411.

truth. The experiences of individuals differ, so that only patterns of probability remain as a possible basis for knowledge or choice. The skepticism implicit in this view was recognized by Hume, who therefore concluded that knowledge was founded upon generalization, and moral action upon sentiment, custom, and convention. Neither freedom of the self, nor the objectivity of knowledge, could be preserved upon such a basis. The early empiricists' attempt to maintain both Descartes' starting-point in consciousness and the reality of the self and of the world as thinking and extended substance was criticized by later skeptical thinkers, who recognized the inconsistency of the approach. For if the experience of what is given immediately is indeed the sole verifiable content of our knowing, then the individual subject "experiences" in this sense neither the substantial unity nor the freedom and universality of his conscious acts. Nor can he demonstrate access to an objective order which necessarily causes his experiences, or in which necessary relationships between things and events in consciousness obtain. Modern empiricism's insistence upon an idealist starting-point, combined with its determination to preserve the concrete realities of common sense, contributed to the skeptical impasse in answer to which emerged Kant's turn to transcendental philosophy.

There is another crucial element within the cogito, which when developed seems also to result in an abstract vision of reality, and contradictory metaphysical conclusions. The significance of the cogito--the recognition that henceforward philosophy must begin with a content known as adequate to consciousness--can be construed in a manner diametrically opposed to the empiricist emphasis upon the concrete subject and the data given immediately to individual consciousness. The certainty of consciousness does not unequivocally rest upon the perceptions of the empirical self, since it is equally possible to see in the universal, innate ideas of consciousness the original paradigm for constructing a rational, objective reality. Thus, for example, logical and mathematical principles bear their truth within themselves, requiring no validation from experience, so that their intrinsic rationality may function as the basis for articulating all of reality in accordance with self-evident certainties. This is the interpretation of the cogito underlying the range of views

held by continental rationalist thinkers, who saw in Descartes' "method for rightly conducting reason" a universally applicable principle of self-evidence, which would enable both the scientist and the metaphysician to approach reality in the confidence of representing the world in terms of reason. Here, the experience of particular, individual consciousness is subordinated to rational reflection as such, since certainty is equated with mathematical or logical "ratio," rather than with the unity of the concrete self with an immediately given perceptual content.

While the empiricist argues that thought must begin and end with the particular subject and the data of his experience, that the method for philosophizing must be sound common sense and the analysis of given data, the rationalist philosophy begins in the insight that if all knowledge is mediated by consciousness, then thought alone can provide a self-evident content for our knowing. Thus, for the rationalist, the concrete experience of the individual subject must be understood in terms of the metaphysical concepts generated by rational reflection. The central project of the rationalist is to reveal those metaphysical paradigms which are the truth of our ordinary experiences. Concepts such as substance, and causality, thus function as fundamental "objectivities" according to which the content of immediate thought and experience can be comprehended.

The Cartesian cogito, then, gives rise to two opposed views of subjectivity and hence of knowledge. On the one hand, empiricism insists upon the significance of that immediate content given in experience to the individual subject, thus providing the basis for an observational and experimental science, for a view of the subject as a purely physical and psychological entity, and for a deep opposition to metaphysical speculation. On the other, rationalism, while insisting upon the universality and autonomy of reason, generates a metaphysical structure which excludes the elements of concrete, individual subjectivity, and particular empirical content, from serious consideration. But that these approaches are equally abstract is already implied in the pragmatic synthesis of both methods of knowing which characterizes Enlightenment reflection.

Empiricism alone can never unify experience through universal principles, yet its ideal is precisely to achieve a total and

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systematic knowledge of the given. The rationalist method of reflection, equally, requires a content for its concepts, but cannot provide this content from its own resources. The "practical idealism" of Enlightenment thought[77] partakes, however, of both the empiricist's reliance upon unprejudiced observation and personal experience and the rationalist's appeal to the a priori universality of reason. The mood of intense optimism which prevailed over this period rested upon the assumption that human freedom and reason could indeed achieve both knowledge of reality and the reconstruction of the social and political orders, in accordance with rational principles. In fact, those epistemological first principles sought by rationalist and empiricist "metaphysicians of the cogito" became here pragmatic assumptions whose validity was taken for granted as the starting-point for further philosophizing and future practice:

> Since the discovery, or rather the exact analysis of the first principles of metaphysics, morals and politics is still recent . . . the false notion that they have thereby attained their destination, has gained ready acceptance; men imagine that, because there are no more crude errors to refute, no more fundamental truths to establish, nothing remains to be done . . . but it is easy to see how imperfect is the present analysis of man's moral and intellectual faculties . . . how many questions have to be solved, how many social relations to be examined before we can have precise knowledge of the individual rights of man . . . .[78]

The search for the first principles of knowing and action has been replaced here by a faith in the authority of rational freedom, and in the necessity of submitting every detail of human thought and experience to its critical scrutiny. At the heart of Enlightenment thinking lay the certainty that there was no problem, theoretical or practical, which could not be resolved by the correct application of human reason, using the methods and principles so successful in the mathematical and empirical sciences. Typical of the view of reason

[77] In his outline of the standpoint and potential of Enlightenment, the eighteenth-century mathematician and thinker Condorcet assessed the strength of the new outlook thus: "Metaphysical analysis . . . gave only abstract principles, while now these same abstract principles, put into practice, are illuminated by example and fortified by success . . . ." Antoine-Nicholas Condorcet, Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind, trans., J. Barraclough (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1955), p. 164.

[78] Ibid., p. 189.

held by scientists and philosophers of the period are these further remarks of Condorcet:

> If man can, with almost complete assurance, predict phenomena when he knows their laws . . . why then, should it be regarded as a fantastic undertaking to sketch . . . the future destiny of man on the basis of his history? The sole foundation for belief in the natural sciences is this idea, that the general laws directing the phenomena of the universe, known or unknown, are necessary and constant. Why should this principle be any less true for the development of the intellectual and moral faculties of man than for the other operations of nature?[79]

Reason here is identified with the empirical, reductive method of the sciences, while all of human reality, including the "intellectual and moral faculties of man" falls under those "operations of nature" whose necessary laws it is the function of universal rationality to comprehend, and then use to gain mastery over the natural order. Thus while reason and freedom are held to be the natural inheritance of all--the very assumptions upon which the enlightenment of all peoples proceeds[80]--yet reason also stands beyond nature, as its critic and interpreter. Thus it seems that man's natural reason and freedom, like all else within the immediate reality of our "life-world," is implicit only, until mediated by critical reflection. The superstitions and hypocrisies of everyday thinking, the merely subjective principles of ordinary judgment, the spontaneous assertions of religious faith--all must be transmuted by the demythologizing activity of pure rationality if they are to possess any validity for consciousness.[81] Despite the apparent initial integrity of human rational freedom and nature, then, Enlightenment thought takes the natural order solely as its object, its content, arguing that to determine its laws and necessary structure is alone to reveal it in its genuine truth.

Enlightenment reason is thus one with the methodology of detached, impersonal reflection and observation: it is the universal standpoint

[79] Condorcet, Sketch, p. 173.

[80] Ibid., p. 174. "Is there on the face of the earth a nation whose inhabitants have been debarred by nature herself from the enjoyment of freedom and the exercise of reason?"

[81] Ibid., p. 163.

of "Man as such," rather than that of particular individual subjects, which therefore mediates and legitimizes concrete human experience. Thought indeed here has placed itself in radical opposition to everyday human experience and sees its freedom as truly realized only in the activity of explaining and mastering phenomenal reality. The independence of reason is asserted over against the world in which human thought and action have their actual existence. The enlightened thinker employs his freedom to destroy superstition, to rid man of dependence upon priests and tyrants--yet in the process of imbuing the natural and social orders with the forms of reason, he subjects even human action and thought to the abstract, reductive power of the empirico-rationalist method. In so doing, the very basis upon which the projects of enlightenment are founded becomes itself merely another content for objective reflection.

But if human "intellectual and moral faculties" are included within the content of nature, and are thus, like all natural phenomena, explicable in terms of objective, determinist laws, then man's enlightened progress along the "path of truth, virtue, and happiness"[82] begins to assume a paradoxical air. How is it possible to insist upon the universality of rational freedom, while at the same time the very universal application of free reflectivity involves objectifying every aspect of reality, including human existence itself? Since reality, to meet reason's criteria for truth, must be shown to function in every detail as a well-articulated machine, so, too, must our intellectual and moral faculties be similarly determined. The free, rational subject thus succeeds in knowing and mastering a world in which his freedom and subjectivity no longer have a place. Freedom and reason are the attributes of a detached, theoretical subjectivity, for whom the "real" world is a non-anthropomorphic world, where moral freedom and all uniquely human interests and values are "merely subjective." If mediating reason is essentially the activity of a theoretical observer and critic, then that concrete human reality which reason seeks to comprehend is inevitably undermined and

[82] Condorcet, Sketch, p. 201.

limited by the very process of reflection and analysis itself.

Thus, while Enlightenment thought maintains the Cartesian turn away from "otherworldly" metaphysics, and is motivated by a profound concern to reconstruct reality in accordance with the secular principles of reason and freedom, the results of its enterprise have been otherwise. Rational freedom, in Enlightenment thinking, functions as a methodological presupposition--the invisible basis upon which the activity of thoroughly "rationalizing" all aspects of reality proceeds. The relationships between subjective freedom, reason, and the natural world are no longer the explicit subject for Enlightenment reason's criticism, which is directed not toward metaphysical reflection, but toward the practical project of knowing and controlling reality through the power of rational freedom. This project rests upon an assumed distinction between detached, free subjectivity and objective nature. But such a radical distinction, far from opening the way to a humanized world of rational freedom for all, rather appears to have sanctioned a standpoint from which the individual subject's freedom to know, and to evaluate, seems irrelevant, and created a world where reason, in its abstract function as a universal method and objectifying medium, commands absolute authority. The Enlightenment faith that rationality and freedom are essential to our humanity--a belief implicit already in Descartes' cogito--seems to lead, paradoxically, to a reductive situation in which our everyday self-experience conflicts with the very "truths" which reason propounds.

The questions asked by contemporary existence philosophers emerge against the backdrop of this paradoxical situation. How is the impersonal, objectifying rationality which we have come to identify with reason as such, related to the world of ordinary experience--that world where freedom and religious, aesthetic, and moral values continue to be seen as self-justifying expressions of our very humanity, rather than as mere factors within a universal causal nexus? Is it possible to preserve the crucial insights of Enlightenment--its uncompromising faith in rational freedom, its determination to liberate man from subservience to arbitrary authority, its scientific and technical mastery of nature--without thereby relinquishing that original Cartesian basis of self-conscious freedom

upon which Enlightenment emerged? The existence philosophers' efforts to reexamine human reason and freedom, in light of the notion of finite subjectivity, can be seen as a response to such questions. But such matters were already being discussed by thinkers who themselves thoroughly participated in the spirit of Enlightenment culture.

Chapter Two

Kant's Notion of Subjectivity

1. The Kantian Problematic

The thought of Immanuel Kant shares Enlightenment's optimism, and its faith in the priority of human reason and freedom, while at the same time, motivated by that very faith, adopting a critical standpoint with respect to reason's scope and validity. What are Enlightenment's basic metaphysical certainties remain, for Kant, dogmatic assumptions, unless their authority can be established by a reason confident of its own capacities. To this end, he undertook a "critique of the powers of pure reason," designed to show once and for all both the strengths and pretensions of man's highest faculty.

With Descartes and his successors, Kant shared the view that human experience alone--and not divine guarantees or the voice of tradition--must be regarded as the basis for knowledge. However, as the implications of this reliance upon experience unfolded, it became clear that certain naive assumptions about the nature of such experience demanded clarification. Particularly in the well-argued skepticism of David Hume, the metaphysical concepts which post-Cartesian philosophy had taken for granted were revealed as inadequate, if measured against the stringent criterion of their "evidence to experience."

According to Hume, what is directly experienced in consciousness amounts to very little indeed. We are actually "given" only perceptual impressions, which consciousness strings together in memory, and by custom unifies into what we confidently call the external, objective world. But relying on such meagre experience, Hume argues, humankind can claim to know very little about reality.

On the basis of concrete experience alone, no universal or necessary scientific principles, such as "causality" or the "permanence of substances," can be discovered to provide us with the surety of an independent, orderly cosmos. On the basis of experience, further, no evidence can be adduced for a substantial self, underlying all particular modes of consciousness. Finally, using the immediate experience of the senses, no proof can be found for such metaphysical principles as freedom, the immortality of the soul, or the existence of God.

Following Descartes, philosophy's central concern was to ensure that the experience of the knowing subject indeed corresponded to the content of the objective world. Descartes' chief insight had been that the relationship between the knower and the external order known must in principle be mediated by the activity of consciousness. Given this idealist starting-point, the question always to be answered was whether the subject's experience genuinely reflected what actually exists outside the circle of subjectivity. The upshot of Humean skepticism is that subjective experience discerns no universally valid proof of an external reality, that it is impotent to establish as true the most obvious fundaments of human knowledge, i.e., that there exists a world beyond consciousness, in which things and events cohere in accordance with necessary laws.

Hume's accomplishment was to draw forth some of the deepest implications of the Enlightenment ideal: to show that, consistently employed, the principle of the primacy of human experience undermines the very possibility of there being a universally valid experiential order. The Enlightenment, undertaken as a celebration of the powers of man's rational freedom, as a program for liberating humanity from blind adherence to authority and unreflective superstition, culminates, in Hume's work, in the skeptical conclusion that, if we argue rationally, such wisdom and self-conscious freedom as we possess are grounded, not in reason, but in instinct, custom, and chance.

Unwilling to follow Hume along the path of skepticism, Kant sought, with his critical method, to safeguard enlightened thinking from internal contradiction, through recourse to a radical new

perspective. Kant's Copernican revolution purports to dispel the skepticism to which post-Cartesian thought is prey, by what is, in effect, a profound reexamination of the Cartesian origins of the problem itself. If philosophy deepens its appreciation of the significance of subjectivity, argues Kant, it is possible both to preserve the insights of post-Cartesian thought, while yet avoiding the skeptical conclusion that a subjectively grounded world is, ultimately, rationally unintelligible. He accepts the skeptics' challenge on its own ground, granting their starting-point in the priority of experience, but strongly defending the view that a more thoroughgoing idealism than the empiricist skeptic realizes must form the basis even for Hume's skeptical conclusions themselves.

The Cartesian philosophy's lasting achievement was to bring to light the self-conscious subject of experience, the cogito which guarantees our knowledge of extended matter even while it remains aloof from it. Following Descartes, however, mind is either reduced to extension, to physical elements in motion (as in the French Materialism of the 18th century), or to the blind functioning of habit or sentiment (as with Hume); or else it is elevated to an "identity" with the divine and eternal order (as in Spinoza), or to the status of an a priori metaphysical substance (as in 18th-century rationalism). On the one hand, the universality of consciousness is lost, while, on the other, the attempt to preserve the concreteness and individuality of mind means that no necessity can be discerned at the heart of subjectivity. Throughout post-Cartesian philosophy there persists a dualism of mind and body, of freedom and nature, of subject and object which prevents the development of a coherent, comprehensive system of human experience. The skepticism of British empiricism in the Enlightenment period marks one terminus of this tradition, since with Hume's denial of the integrity of self-conscious selfhood it seems that the very principle upon which the modern pursuit of wisdom, including that of modern skepticism, had been based, is overturned.

The subject, however interpreted, serves in post-Cartesian thought as the witness and guarantee of knowledge. If we must concur with Hume that the unity of the knowing self is inexperienceable, hence unknowable, and thus no adequate guarantor of the truth

of experience, then Descartes' malign genius has taken up permanent residence in the human soul. Thus, not only the "vague abstractions" of metaphysics, but also the conclusions of science and morality become matters of irresolvable doubt. One cannot claim these things to be irrefutably untrue, but neither, on the basis of experience, can they be validated. We remain held in a state of skeptical detachment, unable to affirm or deny, except as convention and instinct dictate, any truth whatsoever.

Kant could not endorse the unrestricted application of the empiricists' criterion of immediate experience, seeing therein the implied collapse of both science and morality. One cannot, he argued, limit knowledge to that which appears immediately in consciousness, without sacrificing all rationality, and succumbing to a skeptical pessimism from which there is no retreat. Kant's philosophy thus attempts to preserve and integrate the empiricists' demand for a concrete, particular content for knowing, with the rationalist claim that genuine knowledge must embody universally necessary principles. With empiricism, Kant asserts that "all knowledge begins in experience," that we directly experience only sensible intuitions, which impose themselves upon our receptive consciousness, i.e., appear to us. But to claim that because we only experience appearance, then we are forever cut off from knowing the real world, is, argues Kant, based upon the unwarranted metaphysical presupposition that there must exist two independent spheres of being--that of the knowing subject, and that of the objective world, waiting to be known--which must somehow, through the alchemy of experience, be brought together. But if one could counter Hume's repudiation of all human experience as "merely" subjective, with the equally radical proposal that it is precisely this subjectivity of all experience which provides the universal basis of knowledge, then one would effect a truly "Copernican" revolution in human thought. This was Kant's project: to bridge the seemingly hopeless gulf between the subjective and objective orders, to resolve the idealist dilemma of how our ideas can give us knowledge of a real world, by radicalizing the problem's original Cartesian formulation. Kant's transcendental critique involved,

then, working out the fuller implications of Descartes' insight that unless truth be mediated and witnessed within human consciousness, then it is not truth at all. He accepts as fundamental the principle that all knowledge arises in experience, but reexamines what "experience," given the Cartesian priority of the subject, must ultimately mean.

2. The Transcendental Turn

The Kantian transcendental ego must be distinguished from Hume's notion of the self as a passive "bundle of sensations," on the one hand, and from the Cartesian cogito, or "thinking substance," on the other. Kant saw that, if one accepts Hume's empirical, contingent delineation of the nature of the subject, then the very possibility of a coherent sphere of experience cannot be sustained. The basic empiricist principle that all knowledge is co-extensive with human experience depends for its significance upon the further assumption of a stable, yet active, principle of unification, in and through which the identity of a field of experience can be preserved. Indeed, even the notion of a changing, fluid personal identity, totally susceptible to the vicissitudes of time and circumstance, itself requires a prior consciousness of unity against which it may emerge. While Kant fully agreed with Hume that our knowledge is confined to appearances, he argued that without the concept of a "bearer of appearances"--a centre of reference in relation to which the succession of cognitions could have meaning as a succession--the empiricist ideal of a fully non-transcendent basis for knowledge was self-defeating. Kant claims, then, that both the empirically given, and the a priori, the universal and necessary, are integral dimensions of human experience, each to be accounted for and explained transcendentally, i.e., in terms of their necessary function as conditions for the possibility of knowing.

On the other hand, however, Kant saw no possibility of developing a new metaphysics of the cogito--a system of principles comprising knowledge of a substantial self, underlying all experience. If, as Kant argues, self-consciousness constitutes the a priori foundation

for the unity of experience,[1] then this primary activity of unification must itself transcend experience, and hence remain inaccessible to knowledge. In one sense, then, Kant agrees with Hume, who also argues strongly against the possibility of a substantial, knowable "thinking substance." But whereas, for Hume, the experiential elusiveness of the self required him to reject the concept of a unitary self as simply another metaphysical illusion, for Kant, it is the very purity of the transcendental unity of apperception which qualifies it as the primary condition of the possibility of experience. The transcendental ego is neither phenomenal, as Hume's self, nor is it an ontologically independent, qualitied substance, whose "essence" is thinking, and which stands over against an ontologically distinct world of extended matter, as is the Cartesian cogito.[2] The transcendental I has a logical, rather than a psychological or a metaphysical character: it is "valid," rather than subjectively certain or objectively true.

Kant thus reaffirms the Cartesian insight into the primacy of subjectivity, but profoundly deepens his conception of the nature of the subjective starting-point. For Descartes, the immediate self-certainty of the thinking individual was the touchstone for knowledge of the external world. With Kant, this naively individualistic appreciation of the functioning of subjectivity is put aside, so that only self-consciousness as such, the bare identity I=I, remains, as the a priori, formal unifying condition under which all human experience must, as such, stand. This dissociation of individual, personal subjective awareness from pure transcendental consciousness Kant regarded as the only way both to recognize the essential functioning of subjectivity at the heart of human experience, while also preserving that universality and necessity (rationality) which an "uncritical," naive allegiance to Cartesian

[1] Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, trans., N. K. Smith (London: 1929; rpt. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965), see B 130-143; hereafter cited as CPR.

[2] Ibid., "The Paralogisms of Pure Reason," B 399-426.

idealism had threatened to sweep away.[3]

The critical philosophy thus made explicit the basic principle which has guided modern philosophy: in the "Transcendental Deduction" Kant presented an argument for what, in Descartes, had been the self-evident starting-point of knowledge, i.e., the absolute primacy of self-apprehending thought. Following Kant, the notion of the authority and independence of Reason, its significance as the necessary and ultimate condition of the possibility of any experience whatsoever, was firmly established. The problem of how consciousness can have assured access to the external world is shown to be based upon the uncritical assumption that thought and things are originally separate, independent realities. With such radical metaphysical dualism as a starting-point, Kant argued, philosophy can, indeed, never move beyond Humean skepticism. But the central truth of the cogito--a truth but inadequately manifested in the metaphysical systems and empirical researches of the post-Cartesian period--is that such dualism is already, in principle, overcome. For Descartes, this overcoming is expressed as the unity of thought and extension in God, the Divine Substance. Arguing that from within subjectivity no knowledge of the deity can be guaranteed, Kant nevertheless claims that subjectivity itself, properly understood, provides an absolute basis for knowledge. Divested of its concrete particularity and of its metaphysical status as thinking substance, the cogito emerges, in Kant, as the pure self-identity of reason as such. Yet this bare I=I, while it has neither empirical nor metaphysical reality, Kant presents as the active unifier and a priori horizon of human experience. The problem of how objective knowledge can be had by a merely self-certain consciousness, Kant resolves by arguing that this very difficulty arises within the universal horizon of subjectivity itself, i.e., that the metaphysical dualism of subject and object is a structure within unified experience, rather than a problem for the independent, individual subject to solve. Thus, the primacy and independence of subjectivity does not, here, consist in its standing in ontological opposition to an external world-order. Rather,

[3] See the argument in "Pre-Kantian Assessments of the Cogito," Chapter 1, pp. 45-56 above.

subjectivity is, for Kant, a comprehensive standpoint, within which the traditional dualisms of knower/known, sense intuition/understanding, subject/object appear.

From this standpoint, the theoretical question as to what "exists" beyond the limits of subjectivity becomes a profoundly fruitless question: not because we cannot, empirically, escape our individual perceptual blinkers to apprehend things as they objectively are, but because things (objects) are logically co-emergent with those subjective conditions under which they appear. Without subjectivity, the very notion of an "objective world"--a world appearing to a subject--loses significance. For there to "be" a world at all, subjective structures must organize a priori all which is given to consciousness, while the a priori forms of experience themselves are ultimately unified through the synthetic functioning of transcendental apperception.

Kant's critical thought thus brought philosophy to a radically new position. He showed that, out of mere sense impressions, knowledge does not arise; that in order to know, consciousness, far from being simply a passive receiver of external data, must, through active synthesis, itself bring about the unity of experience, and hence the possibility of knowledge. Mind is thus revealed as central to the very constitution of the world of human experience, because it brings to the "manifold of the given" its own organizing principles and, ultimately, its own self-conscious unity. Following Kant, the relationship between knower and known rests upon a new foundation, that of an overarching subjectivity which saves phenomenal knowledge from Hume's charges of irrationality because it limits human knowing, in principle, to that which appears within its a priori synthetic unity. From Kant's transcendental perspective, it makes no sense to seek further knowledge of a world transcending the phenomenal order, since, given the a priori necessity of subjectivity, such knowledge is unattainable. It is only if we persist in speaking of things as existing absolutely, i.e., in themselves, independent of our finite consciousness of them, that the gap between consciousness and reality remains unbridgeable. Kant claims, however, that it is simply inconsistent with the universally subjective character of experience that such an ideal, absolute objective reality should ever

be theoretically posited and sought. If one appreciates the implications of the transcendental critique of reason, one must recognize that reality, for sensuously determined, yet rational, subjects, can only be "that which appears." The phenomenal, for us, is the real, the substantial. The very subjective conditions under which things appear--space, time, the categories--at once, then, constitute the possibility of a universally valid world-for-us, while at the same time, these same conditons confirm, a priori, the impossibility of the world's appearing to us as it would to a non-finite being, i.e., to God's "intuitive understanding."[4] Despite Kant's proof of the absolute priority of a subjectivity which transcendentally conditions the entire range of human experience, the very assertion of this new "absolute" means that knowledge can always and only pertain to the relative or finite, conditioned sphere of sensuous phenomena. The subjective unity of transcendental apperception itself stands beyond concrete experience, its necessary condition and guarantee, but precisely for this reason, unknowable and lacking in determinate content.

It is not the intention of this study to pursue a detailed analysis or critique of Kant's philosophy. The aim is rather to indicate the general import of Kant's "transcendental turn," and to underline the significance for existential philosophy of his radical new conception of the nature and function of subjectivity. The concept of the transcendental ego has had a profound influence upon the direction of contemporary thought, and nowhere, perhaps, more so than within existentialism. In order to focus more clearly the existentialist emphasis upon finite subjectivity, it seems appropriate, therefore, to try and identify those aspects of Kant's revolutionary concept of subjectivity which have been incorporated within the existence philosophers' notion of the self, as well as those elements they have seen fit to approach somewhat more critically.

[4] Kant, CPR, B 145.

3. Kant's Critique of Traditional Metaphysics

One of the most crucial of Kant's revolutionary philosophical moves, from the perspective of contemporary existence philosophy, is his conclusion that finite understanding alone can attain knowledge, while thought, in its speculative employment, must remain without determinate content. In order to safeguard knowledge from the skeptical attacks of Hume and others, Kant had argued that knowledge, for us, must be confined to the world of appearance. The result of this radical new view of knowing was two-fold. On the one hand, by limiting knowledge to the sphere of phenomena, the skeptical question, whether ideas can be shown to correspond to what really exists, is circumvented, since reality, henceforth, is what appears to finite consciousness. But, precisely insofar as this Copernican reversal saves the ordinary knowledge of the understanding, it equally implies that reason can never achieve knowledge of transcendent objects. The concepts of God, freedom, the transcendental self, are not sensuously determinable contents for consciousness. Thus, in principle, nothing can be known about them. Given Kant's appreciation of the nature of finite thinking, the conclusion follows that the claims of traditional metaphysics to possess genuine, non-sensible knowledge of transcendent being are misguided.

In an important sense, of course, this limiting of knowledge to sensible experience "saves" the objects of religion and morality--God, freedom, and immortality--because they can no longer be condemned as illusions by an over-zealous Enlightenment rationality which views scientific methods as providing information about things-in-themselves. If the objects intended by speculative reason lack sensuous content, then they simply cannot be known to be illusory: they stand outside the legitimate scope of both scientific enquiry and rationalist metaphysics.[5]

Kant's critique, therefore, issues in a far-reaching revision of the traditional role of metaphysics. Stripped of its right to

[5] See Kant, CPR, B 423-424; B 823.

determine objects through concepts alone, metaphysical speculation appears, from the perspective of transcendental philosophy, as a fruitless pursuit of noumenal reality. The sole function Kant ascribes to reason in its non-sensible theoretical employment is the negative, yet essential, role of acting as a regulative faculty. Reason is, says Kant, "by its very nature dialectical,"[6] and unless disciplined, will indulge in abstract and self-contradictory theorizing about empty Ideas. This would be a crushing insult for speculative reason, were it not that the discipline, says Kant, is self-imposed:

> It is humiliating to human reason that it achieves nothing in its pure employment, and indeed stands in need of a discipline to check its extravagances. . . . But on the other hand, reason is reassured and gains self-confidence, on finding that it itself can and must apply this discipline, and that it is not called upon to admit to any outside censorship . . . .[7]

In matters of its theoretical employment, reason is self-regulating, and has, moreover, the positive function of completing the successive experiences of finite knowing, through its unifying pure concepts of the Unconditioned.[8] Metaphysics, then, in Kant's view, could claim no systematic, determinate knowledge of its own--speculative reason being, negatively, a guardian of the limits of experience, and positively, a bulwark of religion and morality against the unlawful application of a merely abstract rationality to matters of faith and morals. Kant had "found it necessary to deny knowledge, in order to make room for faith,"[9] i.e., to separate the sensible (phenomenal) from the intelligible (noumenal) order, as the only means of reconciling the demands of scientific rationality and those of religion and morality. The aim of Kantian metaphysics

[6] Kant, CPR, B 877.

[7] Ibid., B 823.

[8] Ibid., B 380. "The pure concepts of reason . . . are thus at least necessary as setting us the task of extending the unity of understanding, where possible, up to the unconditioned, and are grounded in the nature of human reason." See also B 385-386.

[9] Ibid., B xxx.

was to ground the right of natural science to develop free from religious interference, as well as that of religion to affirm the significance of realities transcending finite, conditioned experience. Metaphysics, he claimed, could no longer serve as a foundation for the truths of religion, by providing faith with a theoretical justification. But, in its new form, as transcendental critique, it could forever prevent the encroachment of a knowing confined to appearances upon the noumenal realities which are the appropriate content of faith.

Thus, while Kant regarded the method of traditional metaphysics as self-contradictory--in that it sought, using pure reason, freed of sensuous content, to extend knowledge beyond experience, yet the significance of the objects of speculative thought he never sought to deny:

> Reason has a presentiment of objects which possess a great interest for it.[10]
>
> The ultimate aim to which the speculation of reason in its transcendental employment is directed concerns three objects: the freedom of the will, the immortality of the soul, and the existence of God.[11]

Kant has no wish, then, to argue that these objects are not the product and chief interest of pure reason, but merely those of fear, ignorance, or superstition, as "enlightened" thinkers of the period often claimed. Indeed, his entire critique of the method of traditional metaphysics is directed toward the preservation of these objects against the dogmatisms of science and philosophy. It is not simply because of the fact that men have tended to regard these objects of faith as important that Kant expends such effort on their behalf. Rather, these propositions, "while not in any way necessary for knowledge . . . are yet strongly recommended by our reason . . . ."[12] Thus, the urge to affirm metaphysical objects is not simply a natural disposition which, unfortunately, can be neither satisfied nor eradicated. Pure reason itself declares their relevance, while yet denying them theoretical significance.

[10] Kant, CPR, B 824.

[11] Ibid., B 826; see also B 7.

[12] Ibid., B 827-828.

That they are not susceptible to speculative enquiry indicates, for Kant, that these objects fall within the province of pure practical reason:

> But though it [pure theoretical reason] furnishes no positive doctrine, it reminds us that we should regard this refusal of reason to give satisfying response to our inquisitive probings . . . as reason's hint to divert our self-knowledge from fruitless and extravagant speculation to fruitful practical employment.[13]

Nothing of metaphysics' traditional content is therefore forfeited through speculative reason's failure to provide transcendent knowledge:

> Nothing is thereby lost as regards the right, nay, the necessity, of postulating a future life in accordance with the principles of the practical employment of reason, which is closely bound up with its speculative employment.[14]

For, insofar as reason abandons its claim to theoretical proofs of noumenal reality, it is then

> . . . located in its own peculiar sphere, namely, the order of ends . . . and since it is in itself not only a theoretical but also a practical faculty, and as such is not bound down to natural conditions, it is justified in extending the order of ends, and therewith our own existence, beyond the limits of experience and of life.[15]

By denying knowledge of a transcendent order to theoretical reason, while claiming that the traditional concerns of metaphysics could be validly addressed through the employment of practical reason, Kant profoundly altered the meaning and role of metaphysics within future philosophy. If one stresses Kant's assessment of speculative thought as a fruitless pursuit of noumena, then one can argue that such activity is superfluous, in the new era of scientific empiricism, so thoroughly grounded by Kant's own critique of the powers of pure reason. This interpretation, for instance, was adopted by Comtean positivists, who saw the <u>content</u> of metaphysics as meaningless, because they could not accept Kant's claim that such content, while not empirical, could nevertheless be rationally

[13] Kant, CPR, B 421.

[14] Ibid., B 424.

[15] Ibid., B 425.

significant. Their approach to knowledge is deeply anti-metaphysical in temper, since it argues that only content which is either analytic or empirically verifiable may be regarded as adequate to the demands of thought.

Contemporary existence philosophy, too, is concerned to limit philosophizing to the world of human experience, and, in general, accepts the Kantian view that speculative knowledge of transcendent being is inaccessible to finite human consciousness. But while they are opposed to fruitless metaphysical quests, these philosophers do not concur with the positivist view that meaningful experience and discourse is co-extensive with empirically observable phenomena, all other experience being emotive and so "merely subjective" in significance. The finite subject's experience, while spatially and temporally conditioned, is not limited, they argue, to the theoretical cognition of sensible data. The subject, as Kant showed, is essentially co-emergent with its world--but this world is vastly more complex than the scientific field of sensible objects, and the subject's modes of experiencing the phenomenal order are much more ramified than Kant's vision of the nature of subjectivity would seem to allow.

Existence philosophy further echoes Kant in its assessment of the significance of subjectivity. With him, they hold that the self cannot be construed as an abiding metaphysical substance, existing independently of an external reality: the metaphysical dualism of the Cartesian tradition must, they agree, be superseded. On the other hand, they oppose strongly any naturalistic reduction of human being to its empirical elements, arguing, again with Kant, that such an approach overlooks certain essential dimensions of human self-experience. To argue that the self is nothing but the sum of its scientifically observable components is inconsistent with the subjective foundations of experience, those very foundations through which empirical cognition becomes possible. Any attempt to know reality presupposes this primary subjectivity, so that it itself cannot become the object of further objective cognitions.

4. The Transcendental Ego and the Empirical Self

What, then, can be inferred regarding this elusive yet essential transcendental subject? It is not susceptible to a rational psychology, i.e., to an *a priori* science of the thinking self, since only empirical aspects of selfhood are knowable through inner sense, and it is precisely with the non-empirical that a rational doctrine of the soul could be concerned.[16] Indeed, of the "I think," argues Kant, "we cannot even say that this is a concept, but only that it is a bare consciousness which accompanies all concepts."[17] Since it is not even a concept, it cannot be described as either a universal transcendental self, within which all particular, finite consciousnesses are unified; nor can one claim that transcendental selfhood attaches to each particular individual subject as a quality of some sort. All such assertions presuppose the very categories which, Kant argues, emerge only through the unifying activity of the transcendental subject:

> Through this I, or he, or it (the thing) which thinks, nothing further is represented than a transcendental subject of the thoughts = X . . . of it, apart from them, we cannot have any concept whatsoever, but can only revolve in a perpetual circle, since any judgment upon it has always already made use of its representation. And the reason why this inconvenience is inseparably bound up with it, is that consciousness in itself is not a representation distinguishing a particular object, but a form of representation in general . . . .[18]

The simplicity and unity, for instance, which Descartes presented as rationally deducible qualities of the substantial cogito, Kant argues, *seem* likewise to describe transcendental subjectivity only because it entirely *lacks* determinate content:

> Nor is the simplicity of myself (as soul) really *inferred* from the proposition "I think"; it is already involved in every thought. The proposition "*I am simple*" must be regarded as an immediate expression of apperception. . . . "*I am simple*" means nothing more than that this representation, "I," does not contain in itself the least manifoldness

[16] Kant, CPR, B 400.

[17] Ibid., B 404.

[18] Ibid.

> and that it is absolute (although merely logical) unity.[19]

One cannot even say that the transcendental subject exists, for "existence" is a category applied by the understanding to intuition, and transcendental consciousness, as the a priori unifier of the categories, cannot itself fall under them:

> In all judgments, I am the determining subject of that relation which constitutes the judgment. That the "I," the "I" that thinks, can be regarded always as subject . . . must be granted. It is an apodeictic and indeed identical proposition; but it does not mean that I, as object, am for myself a self-subsistent being, or substance. The latter statement goes very far beyond the former, and demands for its proof data that are not to be met with in thought . . . .[20]

Kant's transcendental self is thus pure, abstract self-identity; but to claim, as would a rational psychology, that that which cannot be thought otherwise than as subject, therefore exists as a subject, and thus is a substance,[21] is entirely to misconstrue the nature of that subjectivity under consideration. To be sure, things given in intuition can be determined in thought as existing substances. But transcendental subjectivity is precisely the a priori condition of all acts of intuition and conceptualization. Regarding such subjectivity "The conclusion cannot, therefore, be 'I cannot exist otherwise than as subject,' but merely, 'In thinking my existence, I cannot employ myself, save as subject of the judgment therein involved.' This is an identical proposition, and casts no light whatsoever upon the mode of my existence."[22]

Ultimately, says Kant, rational psychology--the attempt to know the thinking self as it is in itself--is based upon a simple misunderstanding:

> The unity of consciousness which underlies the categories is here mistaken for an intuition of the subject as object, and the category of substance is then applied to

[19] Kant, CPR, A 354-355.

[20] Ibid., B 407.

[21] Ibid., B 410-411.

[22] Ibid., B 412 a.

> it. But this unity is only unity in thought, by which alone no object is given, and to which, therefore, the category of substance, which always presupposes a given intuition, cannot be applied. Consequently, this subject cannot be known. The subject of the categories cannot, by thinking the categories, acquire a concept of itself as an object of the categories. For in order to think them, its pure self-consciousness, which is what was to be explained, must itself be presupposed.[23]

The self as it essentially exists, then, can never, from the standpoint of either empirical experience, or of pure thought, be known to us.

The self as empirical personality, the object of psychology, appears under the forms of space and time, and acts in accordance with the laws of physics. Hence, it functions within a matrix of pregiven principles, the source of which cannot be elucidated from an empirical perspective. Qua phenomenon, this natural self is a conditioned element within the objective order; it cannot, therefore, be the author of its own activity. It is not the empirical, individual self who prescribes the a priori unity of human experience, then, since this finite conditioned self is a function of those very principles of unity. Insofar as mind, or self-consciousness, actually organizes and unifies experience in accordance with a priori forms and categories, it must stand beyond that experiential order. Thus, nothing can be known of this condition of all-knowability, for " . . . in the synthetic unity of apperception, I am conscious of myself not as I appear to myself, nor as I am in myself, but only that I am."[24] Kant's doctrine distinguishes two selves: finite, empirical selfhood, ourselves as we appear through our own acts of cognition and perception, and hence as we are known to ourselves and others; and transcendental, a priori selfhood, the logical precondition of knowledge, which is empty of sensuous content and cannot be thought through the categories of understanding.

In order to save science and morality from the implications of skepticism, Kant had found it necessary to formulate a theory of "two worlds"--one phenomenal and therefore knowable, the other the

[23] Kant, CPR, B 421-422.

[24] Ibid., B 157; see also B 428-429.

sphere of non-experienceable, hence unknowable things-in-themselves, or noumena. The fruitfulness of this radical change of perspective on the problems of post-Cartesian metaphysics and science is indisputable, but the approach does raise perplexing new questions, notably with regard to the ambiguous duality attributed to subjectivity itself. On Kant's doctrine, the self must be both one with the natural, empirical order, a psychological ego, and so conditioned and unfree, while yet, as pure a priori self-consciousness it transcends the phenomenal world entirely. Insofar as the self is simply a finite, objectively determinable entity, it clearly cannot be the free moral agent which we commonly recognize as our deepest, most essential self; yet, of its transcendental counterpart, we can make no claim, except that it is. We cannot hold, then, that within transcendentally functioning subjectivity we are most truly at home with ourselves, and know ourselves to be free. There seems no room in this bifurcated vision of selfhood for concretely free subjectivity, for an individual capable of ethical choice and action within the everyday world. On one side stands the finite order of experience, including among its objects the particular individual, who is conditioned by physical and psychological laws, and hence is in all ways conformable to the dictates of nature. On the other side is transcendental consciousness--a bare, abstract, logical principle of unity, which can be characterized as neither particular nor universal, finite nor infinite, but which is nevertheless essentially bound up with the natural, finite world as its epistemological presupposition and guarantor.

Kant viewed this bifurcation of human selfhood as an essential element within his solution to the skeptical difficulties of earlier metaphysics. But while a priori transcendental subjectivity provides a new basis for the objectivity and stability of finite human experience, it does so at a certain cost. The radical gulf between self and world, thought and extension, which formed the context for Descartes' analysis of subjectivity--and which constituted the greatest problem for post-Cartesian metaphysics--is in one sense overcome in Kant's transcendentalism. No longer, with Kant, do we confront two independent substances whose

ultimate unity remains problematic. The world of extended substance is incomprehensible except as a function of thinking; the activity of cognition, correspondingly, emerges only in conjunction with the given world. Thus, subject and object are mutually supportive elements within unified experience, rather than things-in-themselves whose independent reality renders knowledge impossible. Descartes' ontological distinction between thinking and extended substance is thus undercut by Kant's synthesis of subject and object within an overarching subjectivity. Yet, this assertion of a universally conditioning subjectivity, making knowledge possible precisely insofar as it itself transcends knowledge, generates a profound dualism at the very core of transcendental philosophy.

It appears that Descartes' problematic dualism of thinking and extended substance has been banished, only to be replaced by a radical transcendental distinction between an empty, a priori subjectivity--which, as Kant says, is simply "the pure form of thought in general"--and finite empirical subjectivity, whose rich content falls entirely within the bounds of sensuous nature. Insofar as the self is knowable, it is so only as empirical personality, i.e., as determined by the laws of science, and thus as not free. Yet, we must assume freedom in our ethical and religious life--a freedom which can in no way be accounted for from the perspective of theoretical reason. Thus, while the transcendental deduction of a priori subjectivity clearly strengthens Kant's case against skepticism, the implications of this Copernican revolution for other dimensions of human self-experience are far-reaching.

The claim that only thought united with sensuous intuitions yields knowledge, implies that any content whose very meaning involves reference to a non-sensuous reality, e.g., God, the soul, freedom, is therefore inaccessible to knowledge. Thought, considered simply in itself, lacks determinate content, and thus can achieve no theoretical truth through its own independent activity. It remains beyond finite sensuous experience, claiming the Unconditioned as its proper sphere; yet, because of the necessary transcendental restrictions upon knowledge, the Ideas arising through pure reason can only be viewed as regulative

principles, at best, or, at worst as abstract, empty illusions. Pure reason's claim to step beyond the limits of finite, empirical experience is, for Kant, a danger against which we must vigilantly guard. The price paid for reaffirming the validity of objective knowledge is thus the loss of any right to apply epistemological categories such as "reality" or "existence" to those non-sensuous regions in which human reason has always taken the deepest interest.

For example: God--Infinite Being--therefore remains entirely beyond the scope of human knowledge, because the very Idea of a Divine Being precludes sensuous characterization. Human thought may be ceaselessly oriented toward this Unconditioned Reality, but because it is human, sensuously conditioned thought, its aspirations to know the Infinite must forever culminate in hollow yearnings. To be sure, scientific understanding can never validly conclude that religious faith in the Deity is misguided: but religion gains this "victory" only by conceding rights over the field of theoretical knowledge exclusively to its worldly challenger. Control over the criteria for valid knowledge thus passes wholly into the domain of science, so that any content which presents itself as true must be measured against the a priori demand that it possess finite, sensuous determinateness, or "objectivity."

But although Kant's transcendentalism limits knowledge to the finite, conditioned order of nature, effectively generating a radical new epistemological dualism between the phenomenal world and empty transcendental subjectivity, he does not consider the limits of rational knowledge to be the limits of the rationally significant. While the Critique of Pure Reason argues that man is tied to a finite, though open-ended, knowledge of nature, and that access to God, or to our own essential nature as free individuals, stands closed, yet the orientation of humanity toward that which transcends conditioned experience is not to be lightly cast aside. Kant denies that the Infinite God can be known in any way, and that freedom has empirical reality, but he argues that these traditional concerns of metaphysics nevertheless command rational consideration.

Theoretical reason is essentially dependent upon that which is given to sensuous intuition for knowledge to arise. Thus it is not

ultimately self-determining: if reason attempts to prescribe content for its theoretical activity it becomes dialectical, and offers us no truth. But, Kant argues, Pure Reason is not an exclusively theoretical faculty. It manifests a practical dimension, for which the limitations placed by sense experience upon theoretical knowledge are irrelevant: " . . . reason has, with respect to its practical employment, the right to postulate what in the field of mere speculation it can have no kind of right to assume without sufficient proof."[25] As practical, pure reason is not restricted by empirical conditons. It thus exercises a freedom which transcends the limits of phenomenal experience and makes claims regarding human existence which are meaningless from the theoretical perspective:

> Should it be granted that we may in due course discover, not in experience but in certain laws of the pure employment of Reason--laws which are not merely logical rules but which while holding a priori actually determine our existence--ground for regarding ourselves as legislating completely a priori in regard to our existence, and as determining this existence, there would thereby be revealed a spontaneity through which our reality would be determinable, independently of the conditions of empirical intuition.[26]

Kant regards reason, in its practical employment, as precisely such a spontaneous faculty.

Theoretical reason, while it actively unifies experience through the forms of intuition and the categories of understanding, remains ultimately passive with respect to the content of knowledge. The categories which understanding applies a priori are logical rules which must wait upon sense-givens for their valid employment. Therefore, theoretical reason is essentially limited by the otherness of that which is given to consciousness--it has no freedom to itself legislate what reality ought to be, but can only make possible the representation of what is.[27] Thus, while our existence

[25] Kant, CPR, B 804.

[26] Ibid., B 430.

[27] Ibid., B 661. " . . . theoretical knowledge may be defined as knowledge of what is, practical knowledge as the representation of what ought to be."

and purpose as human individuals is, from the standpoint of theoretical reason, entirely comprehensible under the laws of empirical science, yet from the practical perspective, the conclusions of objective understanding carry no weight. Practical reason is free to determine our reality independently of those empirical conditions which govern theoretical knowledge, for here reason does not seek completion beyond itself, but rather finds within itself a spontaneity capable of legislating, rather than merely acquiescing in, what counts as truth and reality.

But how can there coexist such radically contradictory perspectives upon the role of pure reason, and consequently upon the nature and meaning of human selfhood? If it is indeed the case that theoretical reason can offer only empirical knowledge of human existence, how can practical reason, with equal confidence, present the human subject as determining his existence in accordance with laws of freedom, rather than those of nature? For Kant, the resolution of this apparent contradiction must be sought at its source, within Pure Reason itself.

The very foundation of Kant's justification of objective knowledge is a priori transcendental subjectivity, which, as the absolute precondition of all acts of knowing, itself necessarily transcends the phenomenal world of nature. Transcendental selfhood stands in radical opposition to "what is"--to the finite, conditioned world of experience. It escapes all determinate categories: it cannot be characterized as an existing, substantial, qualitied entity (as, for example, was Descartes' thinking substance), but rather emerges as simply a bare logical identity, whose transcendentally unifying activity can be deduced as logically necessary, but which cannot be concretely known.

But the epistemological subject's relationship of otherness to the natural world does not directly entail that the ethical freedom denied to empirical selfhood can be discovered within a priori transcendental subjectivity. While it is true that one must, surely, fail to find self-determination within a subject conceived as a substantial entity, analogous to other natural beings, it does not thereby follow that a self devoid of such natural reality necessarily exhibits practical freedom. As was remarked earlier,

the pure logical subject, while it unifies experience in accordance with a priori principles, is nevertheless dependent upon its "other," nature, for its very content, and hence cannot be said to freely determine the being of the phenomenal world.[28] Rather, nature and transcendental subjectivity are mutually interdependent: we know nature because it is a function of unifying a priori consciousness, yet a priori consciousness in turn requires the givenness of sensuous nature as the condition and content of its unifying activity.

It would appear, then, that Kant's doctrine that essential subjectivity is neither natural nor substantial (i.e., his distinction between the self as it appears in nature and the self as the bare identity I=I, which unifies all appearances and thus transcends nature), provides no obvious basis for the further appreciation of the subject as an individual capable of free ethical activity. Yet, Kant does argue strongly that it is in the moral self that our deepest human significance resides. It is necessary to consider, then, how this ethical subject differs from both empirical and transcendental selfhood, while yet constituting no threat to the principles upon which Kant's justification of objective knowledge is so delicately founded.

5. Kant's Ethical Subject and the Transcendental Idea of Freedom

It is frequently said that contemporary existence philosophy's notion of subjectivity is essentially ethical: that it is the morally beleaguered, finite individual, confronted by demands for decision and commitment within a world deeply hostile to the interests of human freedom, who is the paradigm around which an adequate philosophy of human existence must arise. This image of the authentically engaged, struggling subject appears in marked contrast to traditional views of man as discovering truth in the contemplation and knowledge of metaphysical first principles, or of

[28] See above, p. 77.

God. Yet, in Kant, one sees a fusion of these two perspectives, such that neither theoretical wisdom, nor moral activity and Divine worship, are denied place in his vision of being. If we are to appreciate the import of the profound emphasis existential philosophy comes to lay upon one aspect of this synthesis, we must attend to the way Kant's notion of moral selfhood grows out of his analysis of Pure Reason, while also suggesting the issues which existence philosophy urgently addresses.

From the point of view of theoretical reason, the self appears as empirical, unfree, one with nature. Yet, argues Kant, it is precisely because nature is an appearance to theoretical consciousness that the Critique of Pure Reason at one stroke both justifies objective knowledge, and also makes it possible to affirm the significance of other modes of rational activity. Specifically, if knowledge is always of sensuously determined phenomena, then the reference of morality and religion to a world of freedom, and to a Divine Being, can be neither objectively validated nor disputed. Since it is only man as appearance whom we must recognize as unfree, and as limited to his finite role within the natural pattern, then morality and religion, both of which view man solely as an "end-in-himself," have no need to justify their claims before theoretical reason. Indeed, they could not do so, since this would require them to recognize the universality and primacy of the theoretical perspective, and would amount to saying that theoretical reason could know things-in-themselves, as they are apart from our subjective experience of them. The Critique of Pure Reason has shown, however, argues Kant, that on the assumption of such a "transcendental realism" even our objective knowledge of the sense-world founders.[29] Thus, transcendental idealism alone makes it possible to preserve both the certainty of scientific knowledge and the integrity of the religious and moral view of man.

But such a radically dualistic doctrine of human selfhood,

[29] Kant, CPR, B 571. "Were we to yield to the illusion of transcendental realism, neither nature nor freedom would remain." See also A 369-372.

i.e., that man is, from one perspective, free subjectivity, while from another he is an empirically determined object, can easily be interpreted as issuing from a strong dichotomy between reason and faith, reason and feeling, or indeed between reason and freedom. Thus, for instance, many contemporary philosophers argue that while matters of objective fact are knowable through reason, questions of religion and morality are the province of man insofar as he is an "emotive" being. If religion and ethics are thus placed in the sphere of subjective feeling, and feeling is viewed as divorced from rational thought, it follows that choices made in the name of faith or morality involve no rational necessity. The confusion is compounded when man's essential subjectivity is identified with his emotional aspects, so that it is claimed that decisions reached through "mere reflection" fail to acknowledge the role of human freedom.

But the nourishment of such abstractions is not Kant's intention: his dramatic cleavage between questions of theoretical knowledge and of morality emerges from a basis of unity. The dualism Kant recognizes is not between man's rational and irrational faculties, but between the differing modes in which Pure Reason manifests its activity. Pure theoretical and pure practical reason are both reason--they arise not in ultimate contradiction with one another, but because reason's legitimate demands can be satisfied by neither faculty alone. Humanity thirsts after knowledge of nature, but also affirms ethical freedom and seeks rest within the Divine Unity. Kant's argument is that each of these requirements has its roots in reason, so that the two worlds in which man seems forced to dwell are ultimately grounded in an essential identity.[30]

The Transcendental Ideas, Kant says, constitute the chief interest of metaphysics, and arise because of the very nature of reason itself:

> These unavoidable problems set by pure reason itself are God, freedom, and immortality. The science which, with all its preparations, is in its final intention directed solely to their solution is metaphysics.[31]

[30] Kant, CPR, B 425. "[Reason] is in itself not only a theoretical but also a practical faculty."

[31] Ibid., B 7; see also B 395 a.

Although Kant argues that such Ideas can have no possible reference to experience, and thus provide us with no theoretical knowledge, yet one of the central aims of the Critique of Pure Reason is to safeguard these concepts from the universal application of a scientific method which would render them meaningless. Man possesses a "natural disposition" toward metaphysical thinking, i.e., thinking which seeks first principles, unconditioned by empirical factors, and thus absolute completeness in knowledge. The fact that such an ideal is unattainable does not imply that it is irrational to preserve it. Rather, the Ideas evoked within reason function as an indispensable basis for the pursuit of theoretical knowledge. Although the Ideas themselves have no intrinsic content, they serve to regulate the search for empirical truth, by holding up to the understanding the a priori notion of an unconditioned totality of appearances, toward which its efforts may be directed:

> Although we must say of the transcendental concepts of reason that they are only ideas, this is not by any means to be taken as signifying that they are superfluous and void. For even if they cannot determine any object, they may yet, in a fundamental and unobserved fashion, be of service to the understanding as a canon for its extended and consistent employment.[32]

This quest for a higher unity for the endless chain of phenomena is thus, for Kant, the essential activity of reason. Reason's unifying concepts do not, of course, serve as hypotheses, to explain theoretically the totality of nature: one cannot, for instance, explain the processes of nature by reference to a Divine First Cause, since such a transcendent explanatory principle could not be validated in possible experience. But the transcendental Ideas serve the crucial purpose of enabling us to think the systematic unity of appearances. Indeed, without the thought of a transcendent, noumenal order of things, one would be unable to know appearances as appearances. The Ideas of reason serve to draw the categorical activity of understanding back upon itself, to render knowing a self-consciously universal undertaking:

> Understanding may be regarded as the faculty which secures the unity of appearances by means of rules, and reason as

[32] Kant, CPR, B 385.

> being the faculty which secures the unity of rules of understanding under principles. Accordingly, Reason never applies itself directly to experience or to any object, but to understanding, in order to give to the manifold knowledge of the latter an a priori unity by means of concepts, a unity which may be called the unity of reason, and which is quite different in kind from any unity that can be accomplished by the understanding.[33]

From the point of view of theoretical reason, this then is the utmost that can be accomplished by the Transcendental Ideas. Through them, the unity of phenomenal experience is made possible, as we are able to think, but not know, noumenal reality. As a "limiting concept," the noumenon functions, negatively, "to curb the pretensions of sensibility"[34] to achieve knowledge of transcendent being, and thus ensures that attention will be focused upon the genuine capacities of the sensuously determined intellect. Even if they have no further meaning, such ideas must still be valued as necessary ideals, limiting and governing empirical investigations.

But Kant argues that these ideas do possess further significances. The fact that they are possible objects of thought, i.e., that they are not logically contradictory, provides no grounds for granting them objective validity. Nevertheless, it does mean that they cannot simply be dismissed as spurious fictions. They have a necessary claim to be objects of thought, and it is because of their origin in thinking that metaphysics has sought to secure their validity with theoretical proofs. The Critique of Pure Reason has shown that such proofs are impossible, but it has not shown that it is meaningless to entertain the Ideas themselves. On the contrary--the limits of theoretical reason having been drawn, it is evident that transcendental Ideas continue to point beyond the bounds of experience, and do so in a way not repugnant to reason as such:

> . . . concepts of Reason may perhaps make possible a transition from the concepts of nature to the practical concepts, and in that way may give support to the moral ideas themselves, bringing them into connection with the speculative knowledge of reason.[35]

[33] Kant, CPR, B 359.

[34] Ibid., B 311.

[35] Ibid., B 386.

Kant stresses this transitional function in his treatment of the antinomies of reason--a series of dialectical illusions into which reason unavoidably falls when it seeks to extend the categories of understanding beyond experience:

> If in employing the principles of understanding we do not merely apply our reason to objects of experience, but venture to extend these principles beyond the limits of experience, there arise pseudo-rational doctrines which can neither hope for confirmation in experience nor fear refutation by it. Each of them is not only in itself free from contradiction, but finds conditions of its necessity in the very nature of reason--only that, unfortunately, the assertion of the opposite has, on its side, grounds that are just as valid and necessary.[36]

From the point of view of Kant's intention to preserve a rational unity between man's theoretical and practical goals, the third antinomy of reason is central. Here, reason misapplies the category of causality beyond the boundary of experience. It is thus led to the illusion that it is possible to prove both the thesis that "there are in the world causes through freedom," and its antithesis, that "there is no freedom, since everything in the world takes place in accordance with laws of nature."[37] The conflict between these two positions seems final, since both sides in the debate trace the origin of their arguments to the requirements of reason itself--thus indicating, it would seem, that reason is self-contradictory. Underlying the antithesis is the principle of empiricism, which justly claims that all events in the natural sphere without exception fall under the law of cause and effect. In the interest of speculative reason, therefore, it rejects the claim of thinking to extend in any meaningful way beyond nature. But theoretical reason becomes dogmatic, says Kant, when it thus tries to extend its domain to the transcendent by denying the reality of anything which lies outside the sphere of intuitive knowledge. Underlying the thesis that "freedom is a cause in the

[36] Kant, CPR, B 449.

[37] Ibid., B 472-473.

world," on the other hand, one finds the presupposition that, besides the empirical mode of explanation, there are "intelligible beginnings."[38] This assertion, reason makes out of a profound practical interest that the foundations of morality and religion be protected, as they clearly are not if the antithesis is universally affirmed. Yet to claim genuine knowledge of an intelligible origin, Kant points out, would, equally dogmatically, violate the a priori principles set forth in the Transcendental Analytic.

But there is a solution to the dilemma, which will preserve both the integrity of natural laws and the significance of the Transcendental Ideas. All depends, Kant argues, upon recognizing that the problems raised by all cosmological Ideas are such as cannot be resolved simply by reference to experience. For instance, the question whether there is causality through freedom, or whether everything depends on the chain of events in the natural order, is one which "refer[s] to an object which can be found nowhere save in our thoughts, namely, to the absolutely unconditioned totality of the synthesis of appearances."[39] Thus, if in experience one finds no resolution to this apparent contradiction, this should give no cause for alarm. Rather, the failure of experience to provide solutions should highlight the folly of obstinately persisting in assuming that an actual object does correspond to such Ideas.[40] We must realize, says Kant, that the origin of the Ideas is in reason alone, so that if we wish a solution to a problem posed by reason, we

> . . . have only to take care to be at one with ourselves, and to avoid that amphiboly which transforms our idea into a supposed representation of an object that is empirically given, and therefore to be known according to the laws of experience.[41]

In other words, if we once and for all accept that the transcendental Ideas are "mere creature(s) of reason," then we would no longer

[38] Kant, CPR, B 494.

[39] Ibid., B 509.

[40] Ibid., B 510.

[41] Ibid., B 512.

futilely seek supporting grounds for them among appearances. In the case of the third antinomy, then, both the thesis and antithesis can be held valid, so long as it is recognized that the antithesis holds only of phenomena, while the thesis refers to noumena.

Kant thus does not absolutize theoretical reason and demand that the Idea of Freedom either correspond to an actual object of experience, or else surrender its claim to rational significance. On the other hand, neither does he permit practical reason licence to affirm concepts which undermine the universal requirements of speculative reason. The assumption of the Idea of Freedom can only be made if it does not contradict the principles of speculative thought:

> Morality does not, indeed, require that freedom should be understood, but only that it should not contradict itself, and so should at least allow of being thought, and that as thus thought it should place no obstacle in the way of a free act (viewed in another relation) likewise conforming to the mechanism of nature.[42]

This possibility has been guaranteed by Kant's critical examination of the limits of speculative reason, which has shown that the universality of theoretical principles applies exclusively to the sphere of phenomena, leaving a world of noumena open to possible practical consideration by reason. If due note is taken of the critical distinction between the sensible and intelligible orders, then, freedom can be <u>thought</u>, so that Kant may affirm that the idea of "causality through freedom is at least <u>not incompatible with</u> nature."[43]

Reason, then, is the source of the Idea of Freedom. Yet the examination of the third antinomy reveals that we cannot seek final justification for this Idea through a speculative enquiry. The antinomies of the Transcendental Dialectic are the last point to

[42] Kant, CPR, B xxix.

[43] Ibid., B 586. Kant emphasizes here that neither the "reality" nor even the "real possibility" of the transcendental Idea of freedom is within the power of theoretical reason to prove, since these categories, applied to freedom, lack any intuitional referent. All that this argument ensures, then, is that the concept of freedom is a <u>logical</u> possibility, i.e., a possible thought. See B xxvi a.

which speculative thought can attain. In his analysis of these antinomies, Kant argues that such contradictions can be removed only by recognizing that theoretical reason is essentially bound up with practical reason, or indeed with moral self-consciousness, in such a manner that the difficulties generated by speculative thought can be resolved, finally, only in the sphere of the practical, where alone a positive significance emerges for the transcendental Idea of Freedom:

> With the pure practical faculty of reason, the reality of transcendental freedom is also confirmed. Indeed, it is substantiated in the absolute sense needed by speculative reason in its use of the concept of causality, for this freedom is required if reason is to rescue itself from the antinomy in which it is inevitably entangled when attempting to think the unconditioned in a causal sense.[44]

We have seen how certain elements in Kant's thought provide crucial background for the problem of the finite subject as it emerges in existential philosophy. It is particularly noteworthy that, for Kant, the notion of a free ethical self is essentially bound up with his appreciation of the role of subjectivity in knowledge, and with his conception of reason as the a priori unifying foundation of both knowledge and practice. Reason, for Kant, is one, and thus the

[44] Immanuel Kant, Critique of Practical Reason, trans., Lewis White Beck (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company Inc., 1956), p. 4 [pagination is that of The Prussian Academy edition]; hereafter cited as CPrR. Although Kant here says that the reality (Realität) of freedom is confirmed by pure practical reason, this does not contradict his earlier denial that freedom falls under the category of reality, since the reality here attributed to the objects of pure practical reason is of a unique order, not dependent upon the givenness of any sensuous content for its realization: " . . . a thorough analysis of the practical use of reason makes it clear that the reality thought of here implies no theoretical determination of the categories . . . all that is meant in attributing reality to these concepts is that an object is attributable to them either in so far as they are contained in the necessary determination of the will a priori or because they are indissolubly connected with the object of this determination." CPrR, p. 5. And, "Since in all precepts of the pure will it is only a question of the determination of the will . . . the practical concepts a priori . . . immediately become cognitions, not needing to wait upon intuition in order to acquire a meaning. This occurs for the noteworthy reason that they themselves produce the reality [Wirklichkeit] to which they refer (the intention of the will)--an achievement which is in no way the business of theoretical concepts." CPrR, p. 66.

possibility of ethical freedom as a reality divorced from rationality is inconceivable. Indeed,

> The concept of freedom, insofar as its reality is proved by an apodictic law of practical reason, is the keystone of the whole architecture of the system of pure reason and even of speculative reason.[45]

Freedom is thus a topic absolutely central to the critical philosophy. It must be stressed, however, that Kant's treatment presupposes his fundamental aim of preserving divergent aspects of human experience--the scientific, the ethical and religious--within the unity of reason.

Existential thinkers frequently claim that Kant's conception of experience is nonetheless a narrow one, which fails to take account of the multiplicity of modes of human being-in-the-world.[46] They further argue that his notion of ethical freedom is dangerously abstract, founded as it is upon the activity of a priori rationality, rather than upon the spontaneity of the subject's concrete, existential relationship to his world. Yet, like Kant, they refuse to identify our "real" selfhood with the empirically observable ego, drawing a radical distinction between all merely objective, scientific accounts of human existence and an approach which recognizes the primary role of subjectivity and freedom.

Existence philosophy thus stands in an ambiguous relation to Kant's teaching. On the one hand, they generally concur with Kant's assertion of the epistemological priority of the subject. They further agree that subjectivity is therefore essentially elusive--in principle unknowable in objective terms, and certainly not identifiable as a metaphysical substance or substratum, since it is the active presupposition of all attempts to know reality. Finally, they adopt the Kantian distinction between mere empirical individuality and the

[45] Kant, CPrR, p. 4.

[46] Speaking of Kant's philosophy, Sartre, for instance, remarks: "Preoccupied with establishing the universal laws of subjectivity . . . [Kant] never dealt with the question of persons. The [Kantian] subject is only the common essence of these persons, it would no more allow us to determine the multiplicity of persons than the essence of man, in Spinoza's system, permits one to determine that of concrete man." Jean-Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness, trans., Hazel Barnes (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1972), p. 225.

uniquely human existence of free ethical personality. But here dissension plainly enters. While both affirm the central significance of freedom for any adequate assessment of human existence, their views on the nature of the free ethical subject differ profoundly.

The difference centers around the emphasis Kant places on the relationship between freedom and rationality. For Kant, freedom is not a concept whose reality can even be comprehended from the point of view of theoretical reason:

> Reason would overstep its limits if it took upon itself to explain how pure reason can be practical. This would be identical with the task of explaining how freedom is possible. . . . Freedom, however, is a mere Idea: its objective validity can in no way be exhibited by reference to laws of nature, and consequently, cannot be exhibited in any possible experience. Thus the Idea of freedom can never admit of full comprehension, or indeed of insight, since it can never by any analogy have an example falling under it.[47]

Yet its incomprehensibility to reason does not constitute it as an irrational faculty, to be employed in violation of rational principles. Rather, reason itself demands the postulation of the Idea of freedom, so that for man to act in accordance with it is for him to act in a supremely rational way:

> Freedom holds only as a necessary presupposition of reason, in a being who believes himself to be conscious of will--that is, of a power distinct from mere appetition (a power, namely of determining himself to act as intelligence, and consequently to act in accordance with laws of reason independently of natural instincts).[48]

The relationship between subjective freedom and reason is thus articulated in terms of the notion of the "rational will," which is distinguished sharply from the "merely subjective" impulses commonly regarded as spontaneous acts of will. Such impulses exhibit no true independence, since they are a function of physical and psychological principles. Kant, however, understands freedom as autonomy, or

[47] Immanuel Kant, Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals, trans., H. J. Paton (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), p. 120 [pagination follows the German 2nd Edition, as referenced in the margin]; hereafter cited as Groundwork.

[48] Ibid.

self-determination,[49] a property one cannot ascribe to the activities of the empirical individual, whose will is simply another factor in the complex system of natural laws, and whose "self-determination" is thus surely a matter of psychological feeling only.

The principle of self-determination, for Kant, directly opposes all empirical theories of freedom. It may be negatively defined as the property the will has "of being able to work independently of determination by alien causes . . . ."[50] Since will is "a kind of causality belonging to living beings so far as they are rational,"[51] Kant is arguing that autonomy is a rational causality which must be distinguished from the natural necessity governing all empirically observable actions. Yet such a merely negative definition of freedom hardly suffices as a way of grasping its full significance. A will which exercises causality independently of natural law might still be construed as simply an arbitrary, "uncaused" will, and hence as no adequate basis for a genuine concept of self-determination. Thus, Kant continues: "The concept of causality carries with it that of law, in accordance with which, because of something we call a cause, something else--namely, its effect--must be posited."[52] If the will is not lawful in some sense, then, it cannot be regarded as a genuine cause at all. Yet, clearly, its lawfulness cannot be

[49] Kant, Groundwork, p. 98; see also CPR, B 562. "It should especially be noted that the practical concept of freedom is based on this transcendental idea, and that in the latter lies the real source of the difficulty by which the question of the possibility of freedom has always been beset. Freedom in the practical sense is the will's independence of coercion by sensuous impulses. For a will is sensuous, in so far as it is pathologically affected, i.e., by sensuous motives; it is animal (arbitrium brutum), if it can be pathologically necessitated. The human will is certainly an arbitrium sensitivum, not, however, brutum but liberum. For sensibility does not necessitate its action. There is in man a power of self-determination, independently of any coercion through sensuous impulses."

[50] Ibid., p. 97.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Ibid.

imposed from beyond itself, without forfeiting its claim to self-determination. Hence, Kant argues,

> . . . freedom of will, although it is not the property of conforming to laws of nature, is not for this reason lawless: it must rather be a causality conforming to immutable laws, though of a special kind; for otherwise a free will would be self-contradictory.[53]

The "immutable law" of which Kant speaks is the moral law, an imperative which a rational being imposes upon himself, rather than passively accepts as an external commandment to behave virtuously.

If, however, we are to think of ourselves as moral beings--and Kant argues that in fact we do recognize ourselves as subject to a moral law--then the Idea of freedom is the sole condition under which we can possibly do so. The only way we can affirm that we indeed ought to act for the sake of duty alone, and not from motives to which we are naturally inclined, is if we can do so. We can do so only if we can act autonomously. But Kantian freedom is no "fact of experience," to be dismissed if, upon examination, we fail to find genuine examples of it. Rather, the Idea of freedom is postulated as "objectively real," on the evidence of a moral consciousness which cannot be denied. To argue that freedom can be given no theoretical proof is, then, not to show that it is impossible: its significance rests on its necessary role as the condition of possibility of morality. The practical postulate of freedom is justified, says Kant, because it lies at the basis of any morality--or, what is the same thing, of any rational action. The Idea of freedom is clearly not an object of knowledge: the concept of a being which has a free will finds no support in experience. Yet, unlike the concepts of God and immortality, which are "mere" Ideas of reason, the Idea of freedom "among all the ideas of speculative reason is the only one whose possibility we know a priori. We do not understand it, but we know it as the condition of the moral law which we do know."[54] So while we must renounce the objective reality of transcendental Ideas, as far as speculative reason is concerned, yet we may attribute reality to the Idea of freedom through its essential relation

[53] Kant, Groundwork, p. 98.

[54] Kant, CPrR, p. 4.

to the moral law:

> . . . the moral law thus defines that which speculative philosophy had to leave undefined. That is, it defines the law for a causality the concept of which was only negative in speculative philosophy, and for the first time it gives objective reality to this concept.[55]

Insofar as reason is practical, and aims not at knowledge of the supersensible, but rather at determining the will in accordance with the law of freedom, then may we claim that the notion of a "causality through freedom" possesses objective reality.

Our nature as rational beings is for Kant the sole possible foundation of morality. It is only because we are rational that we take an interest in the moral law. Nothing except a rational will could inspire a mere finite individual to seek to bring about unconditioned goodness, in a world where all events occur in accordance with natural laws, and where there is no theoretical evidence for the reality of freedom. So, if reason has "been imparted to us as a practical power--that is, as one which is to have influence on the will, its true function must be to produce a will which is good, not as a means to some further end, but in itself."[56] The production of the good will is thus the sole aim of ethical action--and a good will is a will whose individual purposes are consistent with the a priori demands of reason. Thus, the law in accordance with which a moral being determines himself is a law of reason, the Categorical Imperative:

> The proposition "Will is in all its actions a law to itself" expresses however, only the principle of acting on no maxim other than one which can have for its object itself as at the same time a universal law. This is precisely the formula of the categorical imperative and the principle of morality. Thus, a free will and a will under moral laws are one and the same.[57]

Existence philosophy takes serious issue with this notion of a free will as a will under a priori moral laws. They argue that

[55] Kant, CPrR, p. 47.

[56] Kant, Groundwork, p. 7.

[57] Ibid., p. 98.

Kant's view of human nature as essentially rational--a view which links Kant with Descartes--fails to take into account other equally valid dimensions of human subjectivity. Thus, while they have no quarrel with the basic subjectivist orientation of Kant's thought, they declare that his inherited prejudice in favor of traditional concepts of man fatally welds together subjectivity, reason, and freedom. To be sure, it is argued, man's essential subjectivity means that he focuses, not only theoretically, but also in a practical manner upon his world, and that he seeks therein the confirmation of his own freedom and value. But the finite individual's quest for the good will need not, they assert, be bound up with the affirmation of universally valid, rational ethical principles. Action in conformity with one's conception of the moral law is but one possibility for authentic human being-in-the-world, and to absolutize that choice is to severely restrict the potency of concrete existential freedom.

Rather than resolving the Cartesian diremption of the subject and world, Kant's efforts, they claim, serve to reinforce it. While the validity of both the scientific and ethical world-views seems to be protected by Kant's distinction between phenomenal and noumenal realities, this distinction fosters a profound confusion regarding the unity and integrity of the human subject. On the one hand, "Man is himself an appearance. His will has an empirical character, which is the empirical cause of all his actions."[58] In other words, as a being whose actions arise and terminate within the spatio-temporal world, he is unfree.[59]

Yet man must also view himself--on the evidence of a moral self-consciousness which is possible only if we are rational beings, possessed of a non-empirical, autonomous will--as a noumenal being, who can really act through a self-legislated law of freedom:

> Man, however, who knows all the rest of nature solely through the senses, knows himself also through pure apperception: and this indeed, in acts and inner determinations which he cannot regard as impressions of the senses. He is thus to himself, on the one hand phenomenon, and on the other hand . . . a purely intelligible object.[60]

[58] Kant, CPR, B 580.

[59] Ibid., B 578.

[60] Ibid., B 574-575.

How, existence philosophers ask, are these two divergent views of subjectivity to be reconciled? Each seems equally necessary, yet Kant's solution leaves a radical disjunction between man as genuinely free subjectivity and man viewed as a mere subjective element within the causal system of nature. In relationship to himself as a moral being, man is all-important: a sovereign free-will who is self-determining over against the entire empirical order, and who need not wait upon nature to provide him with either a goal or a concrete content for his actions. The autonomous will determines itself, and has no other aim than that derived from itself, i.e., the final perfection of its own rational freedom. Yet, in relation to the natural universe, this means that man's freedom--his essential selfhood--is as nothing. While the ethical self is the true self for Kant, yet moral freedom is affirmed at the expense of any actual involvement in the natural world. The content of the moral law is simply the self-consistency of the rational will as such. Thus, the finite individual's actual moral choices, the turbulence of his ethical existence within the sphere of nature and historical events, remains opaque, and can never be explicitly connected with the realm of freedom. Man then truly dwells in two worlds: on the one hand, he must regard himself as a member of the "kingdom of ends,"[61] a being with an "intelligible character,"[62] connected, through the requirements of practical reason, to God and immortality.[63] On the other hand, he is a mere finite, temporal creature, adrift in the natural universe, without any comprehensible relationship to transcendent being.

Existence philosophers find this profound diremption at the heart of human subjectivity insupportable. Kant's Copernican revolution in one sense overcomes the Cartesian dichotomy between thinking self and extended matter; yet the Kantian solution of regarding the <u>self</u> from two aspects equally fails to integrate

[61] Kant, <u>Groundwork</u>, p. 127.

[62] Kant, CPR, B 567.

[63] Kant, CPrR, p. 5. "Through the concept of freedom, the ideas of God and immortality gain objective reality and legitimacy, and indeed subjective necessity (as a need of pure reason)."

subjectivity and world. For, insofar as the self is part of nature, it cannot be a moral (free) individual, while, if we identify freedom with noumenal selfhood, the moment of individuality is lost.

Nevertheless, it is to the sphere of transcendental selfhood that Kant looks for the ground of ethical freedom. We are, he says, led by theoretical reason itself to another, practical perspective, from which freedom can be recognized, not simply as compatible with speculative thought, but as a necessary presupposition for all rational beings,[64] one without which reason itself would be self-contradictory. Thus, despite the seeming gulf between natural individuality and noumenal freedom, our reason demands that we affirm the "objective reality"--for practical purposes--of the ethical self who is transcendentally free.[65] How this freedom is possible remains a mystery to speculative thought, unless we concur with Kant's basic position that the human subject must think of himself as both an appearance and a thing in himself.

But it is precisely this radical separation of man's phenomenal and noumenal "reality" which existence philosophy challenges. What sort of resolution is it, they ask, to simply affirm that, since neither man's involvement in the natural world, nor his ethical freedom, can be denied, then we must adopt an irrevocably dualistic vision of the human subject? Is there no way that actual finite individuality can manifest genuine freedom? Cannot the noumenal world be brought to earth, as it were, so that man no longer need ground his truths or his freedom in an incomprehensible world beyond experience?

The fundamental difficulty with Kant's view of the moral self, from the existential perspective, is surely the essential opposition it assumes between the realm of freedom and the natural order. The very possibility of morality clearly demands a distinction of the self

[64] Kant, Groundwork, pp. 100-101. "Now I assert that every being who cannot act except under the Idea of Freedom is by this alone--from a practical point of view--really free; that is to say, for him, all the laws inseparably bound up with freedom are valid just as much as if his will could be pronounced free in itself on grounds valid for theoretical philosophy."

[65] Kant, CPrR, see pp. 49 and 56.

(as autonomous) from mechanistic nature--but in Kant the separation becomes an intractable dichotomy. Insofar as the self acts under the Idea of freedom, he stands aloof from his own finite, phenomenal existence, which functions naturalistically, even in its apparently volitional aspects of desire, impulse, etc. The ideal of morality is that this finite, natural will be brought into harmony with the universal rational will: this is expressed by the very proposition "I ought to be moral." Morality, then, is this conflict between the a priori demands of the rational will and the heteronomous purposes of the particular, sensuously determined will of the individual. The ethical life is a ceaseless struggle between the universal and particular, the infinite and the finite, freedom and nature--a struggle which, given the essentially divergent characteristics of the antagonists, has no hope of a resolution within the empirical world. The perfection morality necessarily seeks must be posited as a "beyond," toward which the ethical subject directs himself, and which can only be attained through infinite progress:

> The achievement of the highest good in the world is the necessary object of a will determinable by the moral law. In such a will, however, the complete fitness of intentions to the moral law is the supreme condition of the highest good. . . . But complete fitness of the will to the moral law is holiness, which is a perfection of which no rational being in the world of sense is at any time capable. But since it is required as practically necessary, it can be found only in an endless progress to that complete fitness; on principles of pure practical reason, it is necessary to assume such a practical progress as the real object of our will.[66]

Kant therefore argues that, although the very conditions of a rational, yet finite, existence preclude the realization of the moral ideal, yet because morality is a product of reason, we must presuppose "an infinitely enduring existence and personality of the same rational being . . . the immortality of the soul,"[67] since without this postulate our ethical quest for the highest good would be a quixotic undertaking indeed.

[66] Kant, CPrR, pp. 121-122.

[67] Ibid.

It seems, then, that Kant's intertwining of reason, freedom, and subjectivity requires us to posit a realm beyond nature, where the inconsistencies of reason and the inadequacy which infects our natural human condition can finally be set right. In the existent world, freedom and rationality stand utterly opposed to our finite temporal existence--but since our rational nature would otherwise contradict itself, we must direct our will and our hope (although not our knowing) toward a transcendent sphere where the ideal of the highest good is actually realized. From the point of view of the ethical personality, it matters not whether the natural world should ever actually manifest the fruits of his rational will; indeed, in principle, one could never know by reference to its empirical context whether a good action had ever been performed. Further, it is evident that moral virtue does not exist in harmony with natural conditions--there is a clear disparity between worldly happiness and moral stature, such that in this life, at any rate, the virtuous man is unlikely to be rewarded in accordance with his deserts. For Kant, it is this very disharmony between the a priori goal of freedom and the actualities of empirical existence which leads reason to seek its practical completion in the idea of the ultimate harmonious union of freedom and nature, the "highest good," or Summum Bonum:

> Happiness is the condition of a rational being in the world, in whose whole existence everything goes according to wish and will. It thus rests on the harmony of nature with his entire end and with the essential determining ground of his will. But the moral law commands as a law of freedom through motives wholly independent of nature and of its harmony with our faculty of desire. . . . Hence there is not the slightest ground in the moral law for a necessary connection between the morality and proportionate happiness of a being which belongs to the world as one of its parts and as thus dependent on it.[68]

But our supreme moral duty is nevertheless to try and further the highest good, even though, through the efforts of a merely human will, such an ideal can never be achieved:

> Not being nature's cause, his will cannot, by its own strength bring nature into complete harmony with his practical principles. Nevertheless, in the practical task of pure reason, i.e., in the necessary endeavor

[68] Kant, CPrR, p. 124.

> after the highest good, such a connection is postulated as necessary: we should seek to further the highest good (which therefore must be at least possible).[69]

Since the human rational will, however strenuously it tries to realize the highest good, necessarily falls short of its ideal, the moral individual is led to affirm the existence of a Supreme Being, for whose "holy will" nature and freedom merge in perfect union:

> . . . the highest good is possible in the world only on the supposition of a supreme cause of nature which has a causality corresponding to the moral intention. . . . Therefore the supreme cause of nature, insofar as it must be presupposed for the highest good, is a being which is the cause (and consequently the author) of nature through understanding and will, i.e., God. As a consequence, the postulate of the possibility of a highest derived good (the best world) is at the same time the postulate of the reality of a highest original good, namely, the existence of God.[70]

Thus, Kant concludes that "it is morally necessary to assume the existence of God."[71] The union between nature and freedom, which is the real aim of the ethical subject, is thus attainable for Kant only on the assumption of both the immortality of the soul and the existence of God. In order to come to his most essential selfhood, i.e., to reconcile his finite, temporal being with transcendental freedom, the human subject must orient himself toward a transcendent reality, while throughout his actual existence the unremitting struggle for this reconciliation alone persists.[72]

6. Toward Finite Subjectivity

In Kant, subjectivity is clearly set forth as the absolute

[69] Kant, CPrR, pp. 124-125.

[70] Ibid., p. 125.

[71] Ibid.

[72] An analogous situation confronts the "finite, existing subject" of Kierkegaard, whose very humanity commits him to a quest for Infinite, Transcendent Being, while his finitude dictates that this quest terminate in a "persistent striving." The question raised by later existence philosophers then becomes whether such an orientation

presupposition of knowledge and practice. Only on the basis of *a priori* transcendental self-consciousness is it possible for us to claim genuine knowledge of nature; only because the human subject is transcendentally free is genuine moral action possible. Even the Being of God himself comes to us no longer as an absolute, external Reality, but rather his existence is affirmed as a postulate of our moral self-consciousness, so that only in and through the necessity of our *a priori* subjectivity is the Divine Necessity itself approached.

Yet despite the universal authority granted for the principle of self-consciousness--such that it mediates nature, ethical life, indeed the Divine Being itself--Kant's philosophy equally entrenches the doctrine of the essential finitude of human existence. Transcendental subjectivity may be the *a priori* condition of all knowing, but knowledge itself is limited to phenomena. Understanding presupposes reason, consciousness of nature presupposes rational self-consciousness--but this transcendental self-consciousness has no content. Man's actual theoretical knowledge is finite, and any claim to knowledge beyond phenomenal nature must be treated as merely reason's self-delusion. Similarly, while *a priori* transcendental freedom is an Idea under which man, insofar as he wishes to be moral, *must* act, yet the harmonizing of the realms of nature and freedom--which is the moral agent's ultimate aim--occurs only ideally, within moral self-consciousness, while outwardly, in the actual world, their discordance continues unresolved. Finally, transcendental consciousness demands the postulation of a Supreme Being, as a necessary condition for the consistency and "objectivity" of its own universal requirements. Yet access to the Absolute remains closed to the finite human subject, for whom God is an attenuated "beyond," which can neither be abandoned nor grasped in his concrete actuality.

The implications of Kant's thought, then, are profoundly ambiguous. On the one hand, by rendering explicit the *a priori* subjective horizon of all human experience, the Kantian critique severs the final strands of dependency upon external authority, divine or human,

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toward Absolute Transcendence essentially characterizes the genuinely finite subject, whose subjectivity is *not intrinsically rational*, as is Kant's subject.

to provide a foundation for reality. Following Kant, the human order itself is the unquestioned focus for philosophical, ethical, and religious interests. Although the significance affixed to the notion of a thoroughly humanized world varies widely, the basic point is that man need no longer cast about in a transcendent, metaphysical beyond in order to discover the meaning or justification for his truths and values. Rather, these can be discovered if we will look within our own deepest selfhood. For from Kant's radical new perspective, it is evident that mind--human subjectivity--and reality are not ultimately alien; or, put another way, modern consciousness knows itself to be free.

But Kant's transcendentalism also sows the seeds of a thoroughgoing skepticism and a deep pessimism regarding the possibility of satisfying the demands imposed upon finite human existence by universal subjectivity. Scientific knowledge may be guaranteed because human subjective categories inform it; but by the same token, the a priori subjective ideal under which scientific understanding proceeds, i.e., the ideal of achieving a complete, unified system of empirical laws, is recognized as a regulative principle, one we cannot do without, but which also cannot be fulfilled. We thus find ourselves caught between a priori reason's demand for total objective understanding and the certainty, originating from the same transcendental source, that such a demand can never be met. Objective knowledge is essentially conditioned, finite knowledge, yet we require ourselves to proceed as if it were not. The tension becomes particularly acute when understanding pursues complete empirical comprehension of man. From the transcendental perspective, we must recognize that we are indeed knowable as phenomena; yet, equally, as the a priori subjective source of the conditions of knowing, man eludes such objectification, and indeed imposes a priori limits upon the very ideal of objective knowledge itself. Thus, the subject here is in conflict with himself: both one with objective nature, yet free to determine the very limits of empirical thought, while the unity of these two dimensions remains obscure.

The same conflict appears in the sphere of ethical existence. Human moral self-consciousness points to the reality of transcendental freedom, a freedom which makes ethical action possible, despite

the universality of natural laws. But, equally, transcendental self-consciousness recognizes the inherent discontinuity between the aim of moral action and the possible achievement of this purpose. Thus, here, too, man is "alienated" from himself: he knows himself as pure a priori freedom, while at one and the same time he is cognizant of the hopelessness of trying to bring that freedom into actual unity with his natural existence. Nonetheless, as a finite, rational being, he is unswervingly committed to the pursuit of precisely this unrealizable goal. Again, there seems no possible unity between the awareness that subjectivity holds within it the truth and the actualization of that truth in finite human existence.

For Kant, this immense disparity between transcendental subjectivity's universal demands and its self-acknowledged incapacity to bring finite, individual existence into unity with itself leads to the postulation of a Supreme Being, in whom the discontinuity between freedom and nature is genuinely overcome. But here we confront further difficulty. A priori transcendental subjectivity is intended as a universal horizon for all meaningful human experience, such that man need no longer seek in a metaphysical world beyond given reality for a foundation of his truth and values. Yet, even though both scientific knowledge and morality are thus grounded in a priori subjectivity, it would appear that only if the subject continues to orient himself toward a noumenal sphere of Absolute Being can the integrity and consistency of rational self-consciousness be maintained. Thus, even as the Copernican revolution fosters its deeply humanistic spirit, and turns philosophy aside from transcendent matters toward those possibilities genuinely open to a finite yet rational being, this very shifting of the philosophical axis suggests perplexing questions regarding the nature and significance of that subjectivity in which such profound confidence is henceforth to be placed.

Existence philosophy is thoroughly imbued with this post-Kantian spirit of humanism. It takes as its starting-point Kant's recognition that the human subject is neither merely a finite natural object, nor a metaphysical object, or thinking substance. Subjectivity, for them as for Kant, is essentially an act--the act wherein human consciousness distinguishes itself from all "otherness," i.e.,

from nature, from God, and thus constitutes itself as self-consciousness, or freedom. As this free activity, subjectivity recognizes itself as the a priori foundation of the empirically real--thus, Kant affirms the primacy of transcendental selfhood over against the entire organization of nature. All experience, including all objective truth, is thus essentially mediated by free subjectivity, so that the claim of any content to a transcendent origin is, from the perspective of universal subjectivity, incoherent.

But just at the point where the subject asserts its freedom with respect to nature and God, there enters a deep uncertainty regarding the integrity of that free subjectivity itself. The identification of one's mind and purposes with universal, transcendental subjectivity, while it indeed establishes the essential priority of self-conscious freedom, does so, argue existence philosophers, at a terrible cost. For such freedom is only affirmed through the radical negation of nature, such that the subject who knows himself as free thereby dissociates himself even from his own inherence in the natural world. Thus, his personal identity, his concrete, individual personality, is lost, at the very moment when, through freedom, the fullness of human selfhood appeared finally to be won.

The distinction of essential subjectivity from merely empirical, objective individuality is vital; but, existence philosophy argues, one cannot deny the concrete inherence of man in his world, without thereby destroying the context in which alone subjective freedom acquires significance. Kant's insight into the primacy of free subjectivity must be preserved, they assert, but his identification of essential subjectivity with a transcendental, noumenal selfhood must be seriously reexamined. The notion of a pure ethical personality, which somehow acts atemporally, and whose self-determination occurs in opposition to the concrete, finite existence of the individual subject, is no more adequate a vision of human reality, they assert, than is Descartes' substantialist doctrine. The noumenally free self is an abstraction, the product of Kant's concern to affirm not only the primacy of subjectivity, but also the priority of abstract rationality. By viewing subjectivity as essentially rational, Kant makes it impossible, in principle, to include within

the primary self those dimensions of subjective life which resist universalization. Yet, existence philosophers claim, to fail to do so--to characterize finite, temporal existence as "inessential"--is to fail to fulfill the underlying humanistic tendency of his entire philosophy.

By his own account, Kant presents man as finite. He is prevented by his particular, sensuous individuality from achieving absolute knowledge of nature, from actualizing his freedom within nature, and from attaining insight into the Divine Reality. Furthermore, from the standpoint of transcendental subjectivity, the finite individual's existence must be assessed as a condition of mere finitude. This is so because behind Kant's defence of the primacy of subjectivity stands the proposition that subjectivity and reason are intrinsically linked, such that it is only through identifying itself with the unconditioned ideals of reason that human subjectivity realizes itself. Man's existence as a finite rational being, then, is to be regretted--so much so that reason must postulate a noumenal order wherein the limitations imposed by finite temporal existence upon rational subjectivity may be overcome. Because his subjectivity is essentially bound up with the unconditional demands of a priori rationality, man is doomed to vacillate helplessly between his own finite experience and the search for a transcendent reality which will alone satisfy reason's ideals. Therefore, argues existence philosophy, man's fundamental ontological condition becomes one of alienation: he is estranged--by the requirements of rational subjectivity itself--from nature, from God, and worst of all, from his own richly complex, and foundationally free, selfhood.

Existence philosophy seeks to preserve and carry forward Kant's insight into the primacy of human subjectivity, but in such a way that the finitude of individual existence--the importance of which Kant himself implicitly recognizes--need not ultimately be sacrificed to the abstract requirements of transcendental, noumenal selfhood. If we find ourselves in a condition of alienation, they argue, this is because as yet man but inadequately appreciates the integrative presence and authority of human subjectivity itself. No doubt the Kantian distinction between the free subject and objective nature must be preserved as an essential moment within the notion of a foundational subjectivity. But, they maintain, this freedom/nature

dichotomy cannot stand as an absolute opposition, without evoking a more insidious skepticism and despair than ever emerged from Cartesian metaphysics. Kant's dualistic subject, who dwells in both the realm of transcendental freedom and the world of nature, is unable ever to integrate these two dimensions of his selfhood. Thus, he is forced into a helpless allegiance to a transcendent, noumenal reality, through which his self-alienation finally can be remedied. Yet this recourse to a metaphysical, ideal order of reality is precisely what Kant hoped to eliminate through his deduction of transcendental, free subjectivity.

The problem, then, existence philosophers maintain, revolves around a failure to grant the full significance of the bond between subjectivity and human finitude. Kant's transcendental deduction establishes only a logical unity between the subject and the world. At one level, this reconciliation seems to allay the modern skeptical fear that man "does not exist in an organic relationship to reality";[73] but unless self-conscious rationality is rooted in the richer soil of actual human existence, how, they ask, can this reciprocity between subjectivity and its "other" become more than a merely empty, abstract principle, which leaves out of account the genuine content of human existence? If the transcendental ego cannot draw man's concrete, immediate self-experience into "organic unity" with itself, how is the alienation which issues from Kant's notion of human subjectivity to be overcome?

The task for those who stand on the firm ground of Kant's accomplishments is therefore to bring his achievement to fruition, by presenting an account of the concrete unity of free subjectivity and nature. This involves both accepting Kant's vision of freedom as man's "otherness" from objective nature but also seeking to reintegrate man and the world on the basis of that free subjectivity which has been shown as the only adequate starting-point for all human thought and action. Moving forward from this primary standpoint of free subjectivity, existence philosophy proposes to exhibit the unity of

[73] Versfeld, An Essay on the Metaphysics of Descartes, pp. 51-52.

man's infinitely free self-consciousness with his finite, natural existence. It thus sees itself as taking up one of the central challenges of Kant's position, i.e., its intention of liberating mankind from his fruitless pursuit of metaphysical absolutes, and of enabling him to affirm the significance of his ownmost human existence with justified confidence.

They criticize Kant for his failure to follow through with this intention, and argue that this failure is largely due to his emphasis upon the primacy of a rational subjectivity. Because of its abstract rationality, a priori transcendental subjectivity opposes itself to the multi-dimensional character of human subjective existence, and thus undermines the very aim of Kant's critique, i.e., that of eliminating metaphysical abstractions and empty absolutes, and affirming the value of human experience. To fully carry out Kant's true intention, one cannot dismiss man's finite, temporal condition as a "mere" finitude, eventually to be overcome. Rather one must come to recognize and value the intrinsic relationship between free subjectivity and human finitude.

Man, then, is not essentially an abstract, noumenal ego: he experiences himself as "in-the-world," but his unique mode of being-in-the-world is as free subjectivity. Thus, the individual subject exists[74] as a freedom-within-finitude, and unless that finitude is preserved in its intrinsic relation to free subjectivity, then, existence philosophy asserts, genuinely human subjectivity has not been adequately explicated. Thus, existence philosophy wishes to integrate subjectivity and finitude, in such a way that the finite subject retains his character as the elusive presupposition of all experience, retains his essential freedom, but does not do so at the expense of his concrete, "lived" individuality. Only thus, they argue, can man's deep alienation--his sense of diminution in the face of the universal success of scientific, empirical world-views, his anguished sense of loss and yearning for a transcendent reality he can never attain--ever be left behind.

[74] Clearly, the meaning of "existence" here is in radical opposition to Kant's objective category of existence. For Kant, the transcendental subject, as the presupposition of all knowing, cannot be said to "exist." Existence philosophy wishes to retain Kant's insight into the primacy of subjectivity, while yet according it a unique, non-objective mode of existence.

The principle upon which existence philosophy bases its explication of finite subjectivity is thus the Kantian certainty of the freedom of self-consciousness. This principle is affirmed in opposition to all "objectivist" views of reality: thus, for instance, existentialism contrasts its conception of man with that of, say, behavioral psychology, as well as with those metaphysical thinkers who claim to know man as he essentially, or even eternally, is. As a result, even Kant's view that human subjectivity is essentially bound up with a priori rationality is set aside, while changing, temporal, finite individuality is presented as intrinsically united with that freedom which Kant reserved for the noumenal self alone. Actual human existence, in its finite immediacy, thus becomes a "concrete a priori" for existence philosophy. All transcendent concerns are entirely secondary, if relevant at all, to the explication of the various facets of finite subjectivity's concrete being-in-the-world. Thus, existentialism is profoundly humanistic in its origins, in the sense that it is man alone who constitutes the focus of its investigations. But despite this apparent singularity of orientation, the attempt to articulate and communicate the meaning and value of this "concrete a priori" has given birth to a complex and frequently ambiguous philosophical perspective.

Chapter Three

Kierkegaard's Existential Turn

1. Two Views of Self-Knowledge

The finite subject--the particular individual who, through the very act of existing, expresses the unity of free subjectivity and its world--is the only adequate starting-point and center of reference for genuine philosophizing. This existentialist view emerges in response to ambiguities within Kant's transcendental idealism[1]--problems addressed, but inappropriately answered, so existence philosophy argues, by later idealists. While the Kantian critiques had established the primacy of subjectivity, and, further, asserted the primacy of the practical interests of reason over those of theoretical knowing,[2] yet the emphasis Kant placed upon the ethical subject still failed to provide an adequately concrete doctrine of human freedom. The moral self is a noumenal reality only--an autonomous subject whose a priori freedom cannot be brought into an evident relationship with individual ethical existence, in its actual historical and cultural context. Thus, there remains in Kant's thought the potential for a profound skepticism regarding the possibility of a genuinely free existence, since it is only transcendentally that selfhood and freedom are conjoined. Transcendentally free subjectivity, and the particular ethical consciousness of the historical, temporally conditioned individual seem ultimately opposed, such that only ideally, within the unity of noumenal

[1] See Chapter II, Section 6, above.

[2] See Kant, CPrR, "On the Primacy of the Pure Practical Reason in Its Association With Speculative Reason," Book II, Chapter II, Section III, pp. 120-121.

self-consciousness, does a synthesis occur.

This difficulty with Kant's notion of subjectivity has provided a focus for much subsequent philosophy. G. W. F. Hegel's Absolute Idealism explicitly confronts the issue of Kant's unresolved disharmony between individual subjectivity and transcendental selfhood when he asserts that

> . . . the Kantian philosophy no doubt leads reality back to self-consciousness, but it can supply no reality to this essence of self-consciousness, or to this pure self-consciousness, nor can it demonstrate Being in the same. It apprehends simple thought as having difference in itself, but does not yet apprehend that all reality rests on this difference; it does not know how to obtain mastery over the individuality of self-consciousness . . . .[3]

It is this "mastery over the individuality of self-consciousness" which existence philosophy shares with Hegel as its goal. But apart from a mutual preoccupation with the alienation of the subject from its proper sphere, Hegel and existence philosophers stand in radical opposition. For Hegel, the only appropriate basis for achieving a genuine reconciliation between abstract, transcendental egohood and the concrete world of actual life lies in the recognition, by the finite subject, of the universality of self-conscious reason. Hegel's Absolute Idealism purports to comprehend all reality within a unified rational system, such that discontinuities between subjectivity and objectivity, thinking and being, theory and practice, the individual and the universal, are mediated by the dialectical activity of thought itself. From the point of view of existence philosophy, however, it is precisely the priority Kant ascribed to reason which has brought about the irresolvable dualism Hegel now misguidedly hopes to transcend, by raising this same abstract rationality to the status of an Absolute.[4]

[3] G. W. F. Hegel, Lectures on the History of Philosophy, trans., E. S. Haldane and F. H. Simson (London, 1896; rpt. New York: The Humanities Press, 1974), Vol. III, p. 426. [Emphasis mine.]

[4] Hegel himself draws a crucial distinction between the abstract, falsely infinite reflections of the empirically governed understanding--which, he complains, Kant identifies as the form for all genuine knowledge--and the "concretely infinite" thought of reason.

Thus, while the starting-point for both Hegel and existence philosophers is the insight that in modern philosophy man grasps himself as essentially free spirituality, their ways divide sharply over the issue of the nature of the human spirit:

> . . . it is man who first raises himself above the singleness of sensation to the universality of thought, to self-knowledge, to the grasp of his subjectivity, of his "I." In a word, it is only man who is thinking spirit [der denkende Geist], and by this, and by this alone, is essentially distinguished from nature.[5]

Clearly, for Hegel, human spirituality and thought are profoundly identified, so much so that only in the activity of self-apprehension is the human spirit truly free:

> The substance of spirit is freedom i.e. the absence of dependence on an other, the relating of self to self. Spirit is the actualized Idea, which is for itself, and has itself for object. The truth, as Christ said, makes spirit free; freedom makes it true.[6]

> That spirit comes to a knowledge of what it is, this constitutes its realization. Spirit is essentially only what it knows itself to be. At first, it is only potentially spirit; its becoming-for-itself makes it an actuality.[7]

In opposition to Kant, then, Hegel argues that the human spirit is indeed capable of coming into possession of true Being, or the fullness of selfhood, in the here and now, and thus of overcoming that skepticism and self-alienation to which the Kantian subject is heir. The difficult quest for self-knowledge, according to Hegel, is the starting-point and concrete terminus of all true knowledge. "The knowledge of spirit is the highest and hardest, just because it is the most 'concrete' of sciences."[8] Indeed, for Hegel:

> It belongs to the nature of spirit to cognize its Idea. Consequently, the summons to the Greeks of the Delphic Apollo, "Know Thyself," does not have the meaning of a law externally imposed on the human mind by an alien

[5] G. W. F. Hegel, Philosophy of Spirit, trans., Wm. Wallace and A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), #381 Zusatz, p. 14. [Emphasis mine.]

[6] Ibid., #382 Zusatz, p. 15.

[7] Ibid., #385 Zusatz, p. 21.

[8] Ibid., #377.

> power; on the contrary, the god who impels to self-knowledge is none other than the absolute law of spirit itself.[9]

"Knowing Spirit" refers here neither to the subjective inwardness of the self-conscious individual, nor to the objectively observable qualities of the empirical ego:

> The significance of that "absolute" commandment, know thyself . . . is not to promote mere self-knowledge in respect of the particular capacities, character, propensities and foibles of the single self. . . . Equally little is it the purport of mental philosophy to teach what is called knowledge of men--the knowledge whose aim is to detect the peculiarities . . . of other men. . . . Information of this kind . . . being only engaged with casual, insignificant, and untrue aspects of mental life . . . fails to reach the underlying essence of them all--spirit itself.[10]

But it is precisely the question of what constitutes "spirit itself" which is at issue when existence philosophy criticizes Absolute Idealism's seemingly concordant aims. For existence philosophers, too, philosophy is essentially a quest for self-understanding, an attempt to move beyond the abstractions and self-alienation of transcendental idealism by way of a genuine elucidation of the nature of human subjectivity. But genuine human spirituality, and the knowledge in which its freedom is realized, cannot be identified, existentialists argue, with Infinite, or Absolute Spirit, without thereby forfeiting exactly those aspects of subjective existence which are most profoundly human. For Hegel, the individuality, the finiteness of subjective spirit must be mediated by self-conscious rationality, if genuinely concrete selfhood is to be attained:

> Spirit is the Infinite Idea, and finitude here means the disproportion between the concept and the reality--but with the qualification that it is a shadow cast by the mind's own light--a show or illusion which spirit implicitly imposes as a barrier to itself, in order, by its removal, actually to realize and become conscious of freedom as its very being, i.e., to be fully manifested.[11]

[9] Hegel, Philosophy of Spirit, #377 Zusatz.

[10] Ibid., #377.

[11] Ibid., #386, p. 22.

> Spirit, qua spirit, is not finite, it has finitude within itself, but only as a finitude which is to be, and has been, reduced to a moment. The genuine definition of finitude here . . . must be that the finite is a reality that is not adequate to its Idea.[12]

Thus, finite subjectivity--the conditioned immediacy of individual existence in the world--cannot be regarded as in itself an adequate manifestation of free human spirituality, for Hegel. Rather, finitude must be taken up into the fuller reality of Infinite Spirit, if its genuine significance as finite spirit is to be actualized and appropriately preserved.[13]

But, from the point of view of existence philosophy, precisely this mediation of subjective finitude by thought constitutes yet another renunciation of authentic spirituality, since it is as a finite, temporally conditioned individual that man first discovers himself in existence, and since, further, it is only as a finite, existing individual that he can launch forth upon the Hegelian project of self-transcendence toward the Absolute.

The existence of the finite, individual subject is an activity, which in principle precedes any attempt to objectify or conceptualize it: if self-knowledge is to be man's goal, then, this knowledge must take a form commensurate with the essential elusiveness and resistance to abstract conceptualization which characterizes actual lived human existence. Only if the immediacy of finite existence is somehow preserved can it be said, argue existence philosophers, that genuine selfhood has been achieved.

The unity between the free subject and its world, a unity which Kant ultimately viewed as only an ideal for finite rational subjects, is regarded by both Hegel and existence philosophers as something

[12] Hegel, Philosophy of Spirit, #386 Zusatz, p. 23.

[13] Ibid., #386. "A rigid application of the category of finitude by the abstract logician is chiefly seen in dealing with Spirit and reason: it is held not a mere matter of strict logic, but treated also as a moral and religious concern, to adhere to the point of view of finitude and the wish to go further is reckoned a mark of audacity . . . ." It is the logician Hegel's audacity in seeking to identify finite spirit with the Eternal, however, which provokes Kierkegaard into his moral and religious defense of the concrete finitude of human subjectivity.

which is present already--implicitly, at least--in human life. For Hegel, this means that, through the mediation of speculative thinking, the human and the Divine, the finite and the infinite, reveal themselves as essentially bound together, such that no radical discontinuity between the world of time and history and the order of absolute, eternal truth can be successfully maintained. For existence philosophers, equally, the skepticism and alienation implicit in Kant's idealism must be shown to be illusory. But, they affirm, this is only possible if we recognize that the fullness of human subjectivity already exists within this world, and need not be sought within a transcendent, noumenal order. In a sense, the standpoint of finite, subjective existence presents itself as a radical antithesis for the Hegelian notion of the unity of finite and infinite within Absolute Spirit: both share a profound respect for the value of actual human life, yet their views of what constitutes a concretely human reality are polar opposites.

2. Kierkegaard's Central Problematic: Ethical Inwardness and the God-Relationship

> That the knowing spirit is an existing individual spirit, and that every human being is such an entity existing for himself, is a truth I cannot too often repeat: for the fantastic neglect of this is responsible for much confusion.[14]

Existence philosophy can be seen as a radical revolt against skepticism, that skepticism which it views as the inevitable consequence of taking as one's philosophical starting-point the primacy of the knowing subject. Such skepticism, it maintains, cannot be avoided by identifying the individual subject with reason as such, and thence suggesting that the tension between finite and infinite is finally done away with through the mediation of pure thought. For this tension is precisely what constitutes the actuality of finite human existence. Therefore, if the truth of finite spirituality is

[14] Kierkegaard, Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p. 169; hereafter cited as CUP.

its role as a moment within a unified system of reason, then the unique activity of existing is entirely lost, and man's alienation from his deepest, most authentic selfhood is complete.

From the point of view of existential philosophy, the solution to the skeptical impasse which modern thought has reached in Absolute Idealism can only be a radical break with the entire tradition of speculative thought, especially with its culmination in Hegelian Idealism. Unless this break can be effected, existence will continue to be regarded, with Kant, as one among many objective categories of thought, so that the unique existential reality of individual subjectivity will either be reduced to empirical being, or else vanish into the empty infinity of a pure I=I. If we are to truly preserve Kant's insight into the primacy of human subjectivity and freedom, it is argued, then we must allow neither the reductionist methods of empirical science nor the abstract reflections of absolute idealism to erode the concrete actuality of that primary, lived standpoint of finite existence. The act of individual existence, in its immediate relationship to reality, precedes all attempts to either objectify or idealize it. Finite individual existence is thus the universal presupposition of all thought and of the objectivities arising from the pursuit of truth. Being--in the sense of the unique mode of human being--precedes thinking, a fact which philosophy, in its quest for absolute epistemological certainty, has forgotten. The speculative mode of thought, it is argued, is thus a perversion of man's fundamental reality as concrete being-in-the-world; so only if all forms of idealism are superseded will the purity of this originary standpoint be rediscovered, and authentic human selfhood emerge in its proper significance.

For existence philosophy, then, the certainty of immediately existing finite subjectivity is living proof against epistemological skepticism: not because, metaphysically speaking, the standpoint of the existing self cannot be doubted, but because skepticism itself is a form of reflection upon actual human life, and is therefore possible only on the presupposition of the integrity of individual existence. One only admits the skeptical problem by admitting a disjunction between subject and object, between consciousness and the world. Since such dichotomies first emerge through the activity

of the existing subject, existence itself is a standpoint in principle prior even to the basic epistemological dualism between thought and being. If one stands constantly within the mode of actual human existence, then, that skepticism which has been the despair of traditional philosophy cannot acquire an independent authority, since even the standpoint of thought itself remains rooted in the concrete freedom of the existing subject.

If alienation and epistemological skepticism are the fruits of man's failure to exist so as to manifest his true subjectivity, then the philosophy which affirms this must indicate how, henceforward, a standpoint of "authentically" finite subjectivity is to be maintained. Perhaps no other existential thinker so singlemindedly pursues this problematic as does Søren Kierkegaard, nineteenth-century religious thinker and philosopher. In Kierkegaard's thought, the idealist quest for self-understanding takes a radically existential turn: when Kierkegaard, in common with his idealist opponents, seeks to obey the oracle's command to man to "know himself," this involves a profound revision of the entire range of traditional philosophical categories, a revision undertaken with the aim of preserving, as the starting-point and goal of genuine philosophy, man's fundamental reality as an existing individual.[15]

Underlying Kierkegaard's vision of authentic human selfhood are two major themes, both crucial for any further elucidation of finite subjectivity. Firstly, Kierkegaard stresses that genuine human subjectivity must be located in the sphere of the ethical, since, he argues, only there does the individual truly exist in that mode of radical "inwardness" which is true to his nature: "The ethical is the inwardness of the spirit."[16] It is entirely inappropriate to

[15] Kierkegaard consistently characterizes man as "spirit," and echoes Hegel's view of the structure of human selfhood, e.g., "Man is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation that relates itself to its own self, or is that in the relation by which the relation relates itself to its own self . . . ." See Søren Kierkegaard, The Sickness Unto Death, trans., Walter Lowrie (1941; rpt. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 146. See also CUP, p. 307.

[16] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 128. For Kierkegaard, the existing subject is identified with the willing rather than the knowing subject. Hegel also identifies the subjective will of the individual

try and grasp such inwardness through reflection, be it historical, scientific, or philosophical, since the very application of such abstractive methods conceals precisely what it wishes to consider. If man persists in seeking theoretical knowledge of subjective inwardness, Kierkegaard argues, then this can only result from, and further deepen, a state of self-alienation (he often uses the term "absentmindedness"), for such activity requires that one forget oneself entirely, i.e., forget what it is to be an existing individual. In contrast to the abstractions of "world-historical" and metaphysical knowledge, which views man as an element within a system of universal rational truths, individual existence and "ethical inwardness" mutually imply one another: "The ethical is . . . a correlative to individuality, and that to such a degree that each individual apprehends the ethical essentially only in himself . . . ."[17] Thus, from the point of view of the existing individual, Kierkegaard asserts, " . . . the ethical is the absolute . . ."[18] and "The ethical as the absolute is infinitely valid in itself . . . ."[19] Because, says Kierkegaard, all other realities are abstractions, mediated by thought, while in ethical inwardness the individual exists in immediate relationship with his own deepest selfhood, then "The ethical reality of the individual is the only reality."[20]

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with "inwardness," but goes on to argue that such finite self-relationality is abstract, essentially incomplete, and so fails to express the concrete notion of individuality. See, for example, Hegel, Philosophy of Right, trans., T. M. Knox (1952; rpt. London: Oxford University Press, 1967), #24-29.

[17] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 138. Kierkegaard uses the notion of the "ethical," throughout his work, in two distinct ways. In CUP, the ethical is primarily identified with the inwardness of individual spirit. In Either/Or and Fear and Trembling it is related more closely with the Kantian notion of individual ethical life as expressing the universality of the moral law--a universality opposed to the heteronomy of the individual, personal will. Nevertheless, for Kierkegaard, ultimately "the individual is higher than the universal"--and the sense of the ethical upon which this study will therefore concentrate is that "inwardness" of finite subjective existence which is explored in CUP.

[18] Ibid., p. 133.

[19] Ibid., p. 127.

[20] Ibid., p. 291.

The second Kierkegaardian theme which bears directly upon the contemporary notion of finite subjectivity is the relationship of this ethically existing individual to God. One of modern philosophy's perennial concerns has been the question of how finite human reality can be integrated, if at all, with the Divine. Following Descartes, man's access to the deity could no longer be taken for granted; as with other aspects of human experience, theological knowledge and religious faith in God henceforth required grounding in the authority of consciousness itself, so that the freedom and rationality of the human subject constituted an essential moment in all subsequent attempts to ascend to the Absolute. In order to preserve both the integrity of human rational freedom and the absolute reality of the Divine, Kant drew a distinction between those spheres which are the appropriate concern of finite human thought and that which can be approached only through faith. However, faith in God, for Kant, is still a rational faith: God is a necessary postulate of practical reason, whose existence is implied by the acceptance of the transcendental principle of ethical freedom. Man, then, can have no direct access to the Absolute in knowledge, while even his faith in God is mediated by reason, so that the finite rational subject has no need to choose between the two. This implied synthesis of reason and faith culminates in Absolute Idealism, Kierkegaard argues, wherein the individual and the Absolute become so thoroughly fused that a genuine distinction between finite inwardness and Divine Transcendence is no longer possible.

Kierkegaard's treatment of the human/Divine relationship echoes the Kantian claim that knowledge of the Absolute is in principle closed to human thought. However, he argues against Kant that the existing individual cannot be thus identified with the thinking, rational subject, since in fact thought is but one activity within human existence. Thus, although abstract reflection may indeed be unable to grasp the Absolute, the question of the individual's "God-relationship" cannot for that reason be laid aside.[21] It

[21] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 219. "Essentially it is the God-relationship that makes a man a man." For Kierkegaard, knowledge of God himself is thus replaced by the ideal of an existential encounter with God, i.e., a God-relationship.

remains of vital, passionate interest to the individual, whose ethical inwardness seeks its fulfillment through a relationship with the Divine: "The ethical . . . is his [the individual's] complicity with God";[22] thus, " . . . all ethical development consists in becoming apparent before God."[23] The individual's quest for an adequate God-relationship cannot be satisfied by the "approximation-processes" of objective thought, but it nevertheless must be taken seriously, asserts Kierkegaard, if we hope to defend the integrity of finite human subjectivity.

The ethically inward individual, whose most passionate existential concern is to achieve a God-relationship, is then the focus of Kierkegaard's thinking. To appreciate the significance of this radical revision of the idealist conception of human subjectivity, it is necessary to consider more precisely who Kierkegaard's "individual" is, and, further, to inquire how it is that this individual, for whom "the ethical is the absolute," can preserve his ethical inwardness while yet achieving an existential relation to Divine Transcendence.

3. Kierkegaard's Finite Subject

> How, then, is one to characterize the existing individual?
>
> > Every human being must be assumed in essential possession of what essentially belongs to being a man.[24]

But if the task for philosophy, as Kierkegaard sees it, is to replace both empirical, objective descriptions of existence and the empty idealist abstractions of transcendental selfhood and Absolute Spirit with a genuine, concrete understanding of what it is to exist, then he must be able to distinguish this new approach to individual self-knowledge from all spurious alternatives. Despite the fact that we are one and all,

[22] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 138.

[23] Ibid., p. 141.

[24] Ibid., p. 318. Kierkegaard, it must be noted, does not reject the notion that man has an "essence" (as, for instance, do later existentialists like Sartre). For Kierkegaard, however, man's essence is his existence--and from this follows his "existential dialectic" of self-becoming.

unavoidably, part of humanity, Kierkegaard's great lament is that his philosophical contemporaries had forgotten "What it means to be a human being. Not indeed, what it means to be a human being in general . . . but what it means that you and I and he are human beings, each one for himself."[25] Thus, when Kierkegaard refers to our "essential humanity," he intends not some universal category, in accordance with which all individuals may be classified, but rather that essential humanity is precisely particular, individual subjectivity--an "essence," therefore, which can neither be reduced to a known objectivity nor transcended through identification with Absolute Reality. To abandon this primary standpoint of subjective existence is to forfeit essential humanity in favor of the delusion of absolute knowledge. Abstract thought, Kierkegaard argues, seeks knowledge of all aspects of the real, including individual existence. But the very activity of reflection, when it is turned back upon the existing subject, ironically destroys precisely what it would know: "Now if we assume that abstract thought is the highest manifestation of human activity, it follows that philosophy and the philosophers proudly desert existence . . . ."[26] For ". . . abstract thought can get hold of reality only by nullifying it . . . ."[27] By absolutizing the standpoint of "pure thought,"[28] man loses his concrete existential reality, by cutting himself off from the very soil in which all genuine human concerns are essentially rooted:

> When an existing individual asks about the relationship between pure thought and existence, pure thought makes no reply, but merely explains existence within pure thought, and so confuses everything. It assigns to existence, the

[25] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 109. See also CUP, p. 113.

[26] Ibid., p. 267.

[27] Ibid., p. 279.

[28] Kierkegaard draws a distinction between "abstract thought" and "pure thought." The former is a mode of reflection which continues to sustain a relation to that from which it abstracts (i.e., reality), whereas the latter is "a medium quite recently discovered" (CUP, p. 278) by Absolute Idealists, which sees itself as emancipated from every presupposition, from all inherence in concrete reality, and which is thus a "phantom" mode, to be eschewed by existing individuals.

> category upon which pure thought must suffer shipwreck, a place within pure thought itself; in this fashion, everything which is said about existence is essentially revoked.[29]

But if there is such an unbridgeable disjunction between the detached attitude of the pure thinker and the interested immediacy of lived subjectivity, how then can one characterize this latter standpoint at all? Kierkegaard claims that the reality of subjective existence simply cannot be known or communicated, at least not in the traditional sense. Of its very essence, the activity of being a subject eludes conceptualization: existing involves a ceaseless becoming which, in principle, never comes to completion, and hence cannot be summed up, or passed on as a body of information. The individual is a radically temporal, finite subject, whose nature presents him with an unavoidable choice:

> Two ways, in general, are open for an existing individual: Either he can do his utmost to forget that he is an existing individual . . . Or he can concentrate his entire energy upon the fact that he is an existing individual.[30]

There is no way, Kierkegaard asserts, that thought can mediate these alternatives, since every attempt to reflect upon this ultimate either/or (i.e., either existence, or the self-contradiction of a "life" of thought) presupposes the thinking individual in existence: " . . . existence has the remarkable trait of compelling the individual to exist whether he wills it or not."[31]

Thus, for Kierkegaard, the most fundamental distinction one can draw is not the traditional philosophical separation between subjectivity and objectivity, such that the individual's ideal is gradually to approach universal truth, and himself become a detached knower in the fullest possible sense. Rather, we must recognize that underlying all such abstract, epistemological dichotomies is the immediate reality of the actually existing individual. One can, of course, opt for a life dedicated to the pursuit of timeless truths, but such a choice

[29] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 278.

[30] Ibid., p. 109.

[31] Ibid.

appears merely comic,[32] in the light of that radical chasm which existence itself opens between finite, human reality and Absolute Reality: "The systematic Idea is the identity of subject and object, the unity of thought and being. Existence, on the other hand, is their separation."[33] The only goal appropriate to the authentically existing individual, then, is one commensurate with his finite, temporal condition. He must abandon his pursuit of systematic knowledge of the Absolute, since this merely nullifies the primary existential ground from which such an ideal as "absolute truth" can even emerge.

Rather, for the existing subject "The task of becoming subjective . . . is . . . the highest task, and one that is proposed to every human being . . . ."[34] Here one is at the heart of that radical reorientation of the traditional philosophical perspective which Kierkegaard intends to express by his turn to finite subjectivity.[35] Instead of fruitlessly multiplying objective "approximations" to absolute truth, Kierkegaard asks what essential truth can possibly even mean to a finite, existing individual--and concludes that existence itself erects an insurmountable barrier before any individual who aspires to the epistemological certainty sought by traditional philosophy. But, if this is so, then truth, for an existing subject, cannot, without contradiction, possibly signify a systematic, rational apprehension of Absolute Reality. For the "absolute reality" of the exister's ethical inwardness functions as a limiting condition upon every such approach to systematic truth. Thus, man has the right to seek "truth" only if he can reconstitute the very notion of truth itself, in the light of what it means to be a finite, existing subject:

[32] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 109; see also pp. 269-270.

[33] Ibid., p. 112.

[34] Ibid., p. 146.

[35] Kierkegaard would regard this as, essentially, a return--i.e., a going back to the original, forgotten, yet irreducible ground of all philosophical thought in actual individual existence, an existence conceived as that "inwardness of spirit" common to all men, yet conceptually ineffable.

> The real subject is not the cognitive subject, since in knowing he moves in the sphere of the possible; the real subject is the ethically existing subject.[36]

One must begin, then, with concrete, ethical existence, avoiding recourse to that medium of pure thinking whose sole issue is skepticism and loss of self, if we wish for a truth genuinely commensurate with our essential reality:

> All essential knowledge relates to existence, or only such knowledge as has an essential relationship to existence is essential knowledge.[37]

This does not mean that one should henceforth look to truths about existence as the only truths worth having. Rather, Kierkegaard is here shifting the entire question of truth into a new key, by claiming that what reason knows is not "truth" at all, at least so far as the existing individual is concerned. In fact, from the point of view of this individual, reason appears as a temptation to abandon the path of essential truth, i.e., to give up the existential mode of ceaseless becoming by identifying himself with the timeless unity of being and thought. But such a final abstraction from his own concrete selfhood is impossible for an existing subject, so the path of pure thought is not only a temptation, it is also an illusion: " . . . existence itself, namely, existence as it is in the individual who raises the question and himself exists, keeps the two moments of thought and being apart . . . ."[38] Thus, truth for an existing subject must be profoundly antithetical to the idealist notion of truth as the identity of thought and being, subject and object. Otherwise, the very notion of truth itself, along with all humanity's efforts to attain it, is simply a barren deception.

The individual who approaches truth in a mode appropriate to his status as an existing subject, therefore, does not for a single moment forget that he is such an existing individual, for whom

> . . . existence is a process of becoming, and that therefore the notion of truth as an identity of thought and being is a chimera of abstraction . . . not because the truth is not such an identity, but because the knower is

[36] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 281.

[37] Ibid., p. 176.

[38] Ibid., p. 171.

> an existing individual, for whom the truth cannot be such an identity as long as he lives in time.[39]

One who thus exists in time can never be indifferent to his own subjectivity, yet any objective explanation of eternal truth precisely aims to "make the subject accidental,"[40] so that subjectivity becomes indifferent to itself and its own inwardness. Thus, the quest for speculative truth leads the existing, "interested" subject into self-contradiction, while yet offering no recompense for this sacrifice of his essential (true) selfhood, in the form of an assured access to Absolute Truth. The individual who abandons his rootedness in subjective existence and chooses the path of pure thought " . . . enters upon the entire approximation-process by which it is proposed to bring God to light objectively."[41] But, says Kierkegaard, the speculative thinker who pursues this ideal of cognitive certainty pursues an illusion, since no human, temporal thinking can possibly grasp the fullness of the Infinite. Yet, unless the "eternal Truth"[42] is somehow accessible to existing subjectivity, then that quest which seems to most profoundly characterize human existence appears merely comical. It is inconceivable to Kierkegaard that man's longing for a resting place in the Absolute should be simply cast aside;[43] yet, if one approaches this goal through the medium of pure thought, one is doomed to skepticism and self-alienation. If man were essentially a thinker, then all would surely be lost, since no other path would be open to him in his quest for the eternal truth. But man is first and foremost an existing subject; thus, "Subjectivity" must be "posited as the truth,"[44] for only if he preserves himself in this

[39] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 176. [Emphasis mine.]

[40] Ibid., p. 172.

[41] Ibid., p. 178.

[42] Kierkegaard equates "God" with the "Eternal Truth" (CUP, pp. 180 and 182) in a fashion comparable to Hegel's identification of God and the Absolute Idea.

[43] Precisely this question of whether an "authentically" finite subject has the right to pursue the ideal of an "eternal truth" is the issue, however, which becomes central for both Nietzsche and Sartre.

[44] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 185.

mode of inwardness can the finite, existing individual hope to establish an authentic, i.e., true, relationship to the Absolute.

Kierkegaard describes the individual, then, as a finite, temporal subject, for whom "The utmost tension of human subjectivity finds its expression in the infinite passionate interest in eternal happiness."[45] Further, God alone is the goal of this passionate quest for eternal happiness:

> In the infinite passionate interest for his eternal happiness, the subject is in the state of the utmost tension, in the very extremity of subjectivity. Not indeed where there is no object . . . but where God is negatively present in the subject, whose mode of subjectivity becomes, by virtue of this interest, the form for an eternal happiness.[46]

Precisely because he is an existing individual, the finite subject is interested in transcending his finite temporality and achieving a relationship with the Absolute. But, paradoxically, since this interest is a project rooted in the passionate inwardness of subjectivity, the individual cannot reach his goal by giving up the standpoint of finite becoming, as the speculative thinker recommends. Not only must he strive to preserve his passionate inwardness, as an essential element within the activity of approaching the eternal truth; this subjective mode is the sole condition under which an authentic relationship to the Absolute is possible at all for an existing individual: " . . . a genuine human being, as a synthesis of the finite and infinite, finds his reality in holding these two factors together, infinitely interested in existing . . . ."[47] The factors cannot be held together in existence through thought, since, Kierkegaard argues, the mediation which occurs within thinking is "infinitely indifferent" to the individual's existential reality. It is rather through the intensification of passionate inwardness that a genuinely existential synthesis of finite and infinite arises: "In passion the existing subject is rendered infinite in the eternity of the imaginative representation, and yet he is at the

[45] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 51.

[46] Ibid., p. 52.

[47] Ibid., p. 268.

same time most definitely himself."[48] Such an existential synthesis is clearly not the timeless ideal unity postulated by pure thought:

> It is only momentarily that the particular individual is able to realize existentially a unity of the infinite and finite which transcends existence. This unity is realized in the moment of passion.[49]

> Nor can an existing individual be in two places at the same time--he cannot be an identity of subject and object. When he is nearest to being in two places at the same time he is in passion . . . .[50]

The authentically existing individual, then, has the power of effecting, through the intensification of passion, that very identity of being and thought which the finite temporality of existence, Kierkegaard elsewhere affirms, renders impossible.[51]

The nature of existence itself dictates that this "unity of finite and infinite which transcends existence" be fleeting--repeatedly sought and reenacted:

> An existing individual is constantly in process of becoming. . . . Thus constantly to be in process of becoming is the elusiveness that pertains to the infinite in existence.[52]

> Existence is the child born of the infinite and the finite, the eternal and temporal, and is therefore a constant striving.[53]

> . . . however much the subject has the infinite within himself, through being an existing individual, he is in process of becoming.[54]

The existing subject cannot abandon the ideal of a synthesis of finite and infinite, then, because it is precisely this tension between finite temporality and the infinite which shapes the essential activity of existence.

[48] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 176.

[49] Ibid., p. 176. [Emphasis mine.]

[50] Ibid., p. 178.

[51] "The systematic Idea is the identity of subject and object, the unity of thought and being. Existence, on the other hand, is their separation." Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 112. [Emphasis mine.]

[52] Ibid., p. 79.

[53] Ibid., p. 85.

[54] Ibid.

The tension is extreme for the ethically existing subject, because, qua existing, he cannot hope for its final resolution within temporal existence, while yet the temptation to seek such a resolution is ever-present:

> The longer he [the ethical individual] lives . . . the more readily may the metaphysical principle seem to be confirmed, that the outward is the inward, the inward the outward, the one wholly commensurable with the other. But this is precisely the temptation to be met and conquered; and hence the ethical becomes day by day increasingly difficult, insofar as the ethical precisely consists in that true hypertension of the infinite in the spirit of man . . . .[55]

To affirm the truth of subjective existence clearly does not require that one reject the idealist view that absolute truth means the reconciliation of finite with infinite reality. Kierkegaard's claim is rather that no "true" human being can identify himself and his finite existence with a merely speculative synthesis of these factors:

> . . . the notion of truth as an identity of thought and being is a chimera of abstraction . . . not because the truth is not such an identity, but because the knower is an existing individual . . . .[56]

The finite individual's central task, then, is not to know the truth, i.e., to become objective to himself; rather it is to become subjective, to exist in a state of truth, or authenticity, by holding fast to, and enhancing, his essential subjectivity. Further, this genuinely existing individual is most fully himself (i.e., subjective) when he relates, from within the mode of finite subjective existence, to the eternal truth, or God.

4. Ambiguous Existential Ideals

i. The Ideal of Persistent Striving

So if the existing individual is to become what he essentially is, he must orient himself toward transcendence, not in the manner of

[55] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 123.

[56] Ibid., p. 176; see also p. 170.

a speculative thinker seeking finality, but as one for whom

> . . . the ideal of persistent striving expresses the existing subject's ethical view of life.[57]

But if the authentic individual is fundamentally characterized by his consciousness of being such an existing subject, i.e., one for whom metaphysical finality is in principle unattainable, then his persistent striving can only be seen as a concrete expression of this existential self-understanding and condition, rather than as a valiant effort to attain finality:

> . . . the persistent striving represents the consciousness of being an existing individual; the constant learning is the expression for the incessant realization, in no moment complete as long as the subject is in existence; the subject is aware of this fact, and hence is not deceived.[58]

Yet, the striving must nevertheless be more than a "constant learning," since, as Kierkegaard elsewhere remarks, its underlying aim is to intensify subjective passion so that a momentary transcendence of existence,[59] i.e., an overcoming of that separation of thought and being which existence is,[60] may indeed be achieved.

There appears here to be a problematic ambivalence within the notion of "persistent striving" as the chief ethical activity for the authentically existing individual. On the one hand, it is said that the exister must concentrate attention upon "the circumstance that he is an existing individual"[61]--upon his essential finitude and temporality, upon his ineffable subjective inwardness; his "highest task is to become subjective."[62] This turn to subjectivity bases itself upon a rejection of the deceptive speculative thesis that there is no ultimate disjunction between the finite, individual subject and Absolute Reality. The authentically existing subject--and

[57] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 110. [Emphasis mine.]

[58] Ibid.

[59] Ibid., p. 176.

[60] Ibid., p. 171.

[61] Ibid., p. 109.

[62] Ibid., p. 146.

particularly the subjective thinker--is explicitly aware that no mediation of the individual and the Absolute is possible within existence, that there is "an absolute difference that distinguishes man from God . . ."[63] and thus that his highest duty, as an existing individual, is to preserve and exemplify, within his own existence, the truth of the radical diremption of finite and infinite. To "persistently strive" is the common fate of humanity,[64] for whom time and finitude block the path to God: "An existing individual is constantly in process of becoming";[65] and "Existence itself, the act of existing, is a striving . . . ."[66]

But if man cannot help but participate, "whether he wills it or not," in the ceaseless striving which characterizes human reality, then the ethical imperative to become an authentically existing individual must mean more than that one should simply continue in this state. The authentic individual must exist in the consciousness of this condition, and, guided by his awareness, his central ethical concern should be to develop fully that which he already "is":

> Every subject is an existing subject, which should receive an essential expression in all his knowledge. Particularly it must be expressed through the prevention of an illusory finality, whether in perceptual certainty, or in historical knowledge, or in illusory speculative results.[67]

The authentic individual must preserve the ideal of constant striving, then, over against the perennial temptation to seek finality within any dimension of human experience: " . . . one always feels the need to have something finished and complete; but this desire does not come from the good, but needs to be renounced."[68] Such an individual "is conscious of the negativity of the infinite in existence, and he constantly keeps the wound of the negative open . . .," renouncing the temptation to "let the wound heal over and become positive."[69]

[63] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 195.

[64] Ibid., p. 74.

[65] Ibid., p. 79.

[66] Ibid., p. 84.

[67] Ibid., p. 75. [Emphasis mine.]

[68] Ibid., p. 79.

[69] Ibid., p. 78.

Thus, the authentically existing subject is characterized by a conscious concentration upon his own finite, temporal existence--an existence which is oriented toward the infinite, but which, because it is also essentially temporal, a "process of becoming," and hence radically separate from that Eternal Reality it seeks, can only be a persistent striving. The ethical subject persistently strives to keep that "persistent striving" to which all humanity is subject as purely free as he can from the illusion that finality is possible. He struggles adequately to express in his actual existence, that state of persistent struggle, that separation from the Absolute, which essentially characterizes man's ontological condition, "whether he wills it or not."[70]

ii. The Ideal of Certainty

But although, on the one hand, the individual's chief ethical interest is " . . . the development or transformation of [his] subjectivity, its infinite concentration in itself . . .,"[71] so that in becoming increasingly subjective he may preserve and consciously live the irreducible tension between finite and infinite which distinguishes existence, yet, on the other hand, the ethical is explicitly oriented toward achieving a radical, if momentary, transcendence of existence itself. Through the intensification of subjective inwardness, the existing individual may achieve a "certainty" such as eludes all who would seek truth and finality through the mediations of pure thought. It is impossible for an existing individual to transcend himself objectively,[72], yet, in

[70] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 109. In this distinction between the pre-reflective striving of all men and the struggle consciously to express one's temporal becoming, is an anticipation of Heidegger's distinction between the "ontic" and the "ontological." Heidegger sees Kierkegaard's "authentic individual" as an "ontic" thinker only--one for whom the structure and motives of his finite existence have not become explicit. Yet, here, the ethically-inward exister does seek to transform mere temporal becoming into a self-conscious relationship to being--hence, seeks an "ontological" standpoint, in Heidegger's sense.

[71] Ibid., p. 116.

[72] Ibid., p. 176.

passion, the authentically inward subject is able to "realize the truth"[73] which has been denied to "scribbling modern philosophy."[74]

Thus, when Kierkegaard exhorts the individual to recall his essential finitude and subjectivity, he is not also recommending that he abandon the traditional search for Eternal Truth. He is arguing rather that Eternal Truth legitimately concerns the finite, authentically existing subject, and not the abstract knower who entangles himself in the false infinity of endless reflection and so never actually arrives at the final insight he seeks. If one becomes a genuine individual, infinitely concerned with one's own existence, however, then one approaches the Eternal Truth in the sole mode appropriate to the human condition.

The intense inwardness peculiar to ethical existence directs the individual not only beyond existence toward the Eternal, but also beyond skepticism toward certainty, a certainty inaccessible to scientific, historical, or speculative thought. Although the various modes of "positive reflection," i.e., reflection which brings forth completed results, purport to overcome skepticism, Kierkegaard asserts that " . . . all this positiveness is sheer falsity."[75] The individual who would find essential knowledge in history " . . . moves constantly in the sphere of approximation-knowledge, in his supposed positivity deluding himself with the semblance of certainty."[76] The existing individual who seeks similar finality through speculative enquiry equally deludes himself that he may transcend existence and know himself and all reality sub specie aeterni. But if the certainty the existing individual demands cannot be discovered in either scientific or metaphysical knowledge, for Kierkegaard this does not imply that certainty itself is therefore an unseemly ideal for a finite subject.[77] It is our insistence upon metaphysical finality, upon conclusive theoretical results, which tempts us into

[73] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 175.

[74] Ibid., p. 176.

[75] Ibid., p. 75.

[76] Ibid.

[77] Nietzsche, however, questions this ideal of certainty itself, and asks whether a genuinely finite subject--one who is "true to the earth"--can meaningfully pursue Absolute truth, whether that pursuit be metaphysical, ethical, or religious.

our present self-alienation, and which, in the name of truth, prevents the existing subject from attaining a "certain" identity with Eternal Truth: "The most dangerous form of scepticism is always that which least looks like it. The notion that pure thought is the positive truth for an existing individual is sheer scepticism . . . ."[78] Such skepticism can be overcome, and "genuine certainty" achieved, however, if we " . . . have the courage to be human,"[79] the courage to look beyond abstract thought and the elusive certainty it proffers.

The existing individual must resolutely resist the temptation to respond to the "idealistic scepticism" of "Kant's misleading reflection which brings reality into connection with thought" by adopting Hegel's "fantastic hypothesis of pure thought,"[80] which would have us transcend existence altogether. We must rather decisively turn back upon our finite, subjective existence, conquering skepticism by a radical act of will:

> There is only one thing to do with such a scepticism, and that is to break with it.[81]

Such an act demands courage, since in abandoning the path of philosophical thought, the existing subject abandons also the philosophical faith that skepticism must ultimately yield sway to rational truth. This decisive retreat from one of the most fundamental precepts of Western thought could lead the subject who so chooses into skeptical despair. But, for Kierkegaard, the retreat to existence opens the way for the first time to a genuine certainty, insofar as it recognizes that essential knowledge cannot be found in an order of truth in itself indifferent to the finite subjectivity of the existing individual.[82]

[78] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 275.

[79] Ibid., p. 274.

[80] Ibid., p. 292.

[81] Ibid.

[82] Kierkegaard's "existing subject" must have the courage to risk abandoning the quest for rational truth (for the ultimate unification of thought and Being), and to choose instead to seek truth in subjective certainty, i.e., in ethical inwardness and its corresponding "leap" to the eternal truth. If one questions the "authenticity" of this fundamental demand for some form of "certainty," then new

This genuine certainty is possible for the existing subject through the ethical reality of a life of inwardness:

> The ethical alone is certain; to concentrate upon the ethical yields the only knowledge which may not possibly in the last moment transform itself into a hypothesis; to exist in the ethical constitutes the only secure knowledge . . . .[83]

But the imperative to "exist in the ethical" is, as we have already indicated, an ambiguous one. Concentration upon the ethical requires the existing subject to focus upon his own inwardness. Only thus can he manifest and preserve the "truth" of subjectivity, i.e., of that persistent striving grounded in the separation of finite and infinite, which essentially marks human existence. But, equally, the authentically ethical individual aspires to achieve an adequate and appropriate relationship to Transcendence, to the "eternal Truth." He hopes to overcome the disintegrative mode of finite becoming by intensifying his inwardness to the point of passion, and thus momentarily unifying his finite ethical reality (i.e., his inwardness) with the Infinite as such.

Clearly, only an individual who struggles to preserve himself at the standpoint of existence, of persistent striving, can entertain this hope for an existential unity with the Divine. But precisely for this reason, the problem of how authentically to "exist in the ethical" becomes extreme. For if one must initially achieve authentic inwardness in order to earn the reward of a genuine God-relationship,[84] then the danger for the individual is that this struggle to "become subjective" will itself remain his central preoccupation, thus isolating him even more effectively from the eternal Truth, rather than facilitating his approach to it. If the

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occasions for courage and risk-taking arise: e.g., Nietzsche's courage to live with uncertainty and radical relativity; Sartre's courage to face the "useless passion" of human existential freedom.

[83] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 136. [Emphasis mine.]

[84] Ibid., p. 146. "The task of becoming subjective . . . may be presumed to be the highest task . . . just as, correspondingly, the highest reward, an eternal happiness, exists only for those who are subjective." [Emphasis mine.]

ethical individual's role is to live out the existential separation of man from Absolute Being, by becoming increasingly subjective, at what point could one say that authentic inwardness has been realized, such that the existing subject can now validly aspire to a God-relationship? Put another way: at what point could the subject justifiably seek to transcend existence, i.e., to transcend precisely that existential separation of finite and infinite which he had struggled to cultivate? One might argue that no such point could emerge, if existence is indeed essentially a persistent striving.

Yet existence, for Kierkegaard, seems equally to contain within itself the motive for its own overcoming:

> . . . God is negatively present in the subject; whose mode of subjectivity becomes, by virtue of this interest, the form for an eternal happiness.[85]

If the Infinite is negatively present in the finite subject, then it is present as a lack, hence as an ideal toward which the existing individual persistently strives. But also it is this presence of the negative, of a lack of union with the Infinite, which renders existence, not only ethically, but ontologically, a persistent striving, rather than a self-contained, positive reality:

> Thus constantly to be in process of becoming is the elusiveness that pertains to the infinite in existence.[86]

> Since the existing subject is always just as negative as he is positive he is always striving.[87]

Kierkegaard's use of the term "negative" indicates a complex interplay between the existing subject's ethical inwardness and the effort to make of that inwardness the locus for an authentic encounter with Eternal Truth. There is, he contends, an unavoidable "negative element" in all existence: "The negative is present in existence and present everywhere."[88] By this he means that human existence is

[85] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 52. There is an analogy here with Descartes, for whom (see above, Chapter I) the "infinite" freedom of hyperbolical doubt is possible and meaningful only because God, the Infinite as such, is already present within the cogito. For Descartes, however, this presence takes the form of a positive Idea of God, while, for Kierkegaard, the subject's infinitely striving existential freedom is informed by the negative factor of his need for a God-relationship.

[86] Ibid., p. 79.

[87] Ibid., p. 78.

[88] Ibid., p. 75.

essentially incomplete, a ceaseless process of becoming. The authentically existing subject will recognize this negativity, will "become aware of its presence continuously,"[89] and therefore, "conscious of the negativity of the infinite in existence,"[90] will "constantly keep the wound of the negative open."[91] But here a crucial ambivalence in the term "negative" appears. The "negative" refers, on the one hand, simply to the inescapable becoming which infects existence, and forever prevents the existing individual either from being a self-contained, substantial entity, or from identifying through thought with the Eternal Truth.[92] But this negativity--this sheer openness to self-transcendence which permeates all existence--is further the "negativity of the infinite in existence." Thus while the authentic individual must persistently strive to reflect existentially the structure of existence in his own existence, i.e., to keep open the wound of the negative, by expressing existentially the ontological separation of subject and object, of finite and infinite which existence is,[93] he equally is committed to recognizing that this negativity is not simply hopeless futurity, but inspires and shapes the existing subject's persistent quest for an existential synthesis of finite individuality and Infinite Being. The infinite is "negatively present" in the finite subject: i.e., as existing, the subject cannot hope to identify once and for all with the Eternal Truth. Yet, the infinite is "negatively present" in the finite subject: i.e., the infinite contributes to the very meaning of what it is to exist.

The persistent striving which characterizes existence is thus inherently ambiguous. "Existence is the child that is born of the

[89] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 75.

[90] Ibid., p. 78.

[91] Ibid.

[92] Ibid.

[93] This characterization of existence as an "infinite striving" toward that which it lacks (i.e., God) reappears in Sartre in a much more despairing, extreme formulation.

infinite and the finite, the eternal and temporal . . . ."[94] On the one hand, it is itself "infinite," in the abstract sense that it cannot cease: it is the mode definitive of existence, of that temporal dispersal of moments which existing is. But further, the existing subject's infinite striving is "directed toward the infinite,"[95] toward an authentic identification with Eternal Truth. This unity with Absolute Reality is negatively present in the finite subject, and therefore positively informs and directs his "infinite becoming." Thus, even though no metaphysical finality is possible for the finite subject, yet his infinite striving is nevertheless pervaded by the explicit consciousness that "the infinite and eternal is the only certainty,"[96] and hence by the persistent attempt to actualize this "certain" relationship with Eternal Truth. The mode of his hoped-for identification with the Infinite is, however, unavoidably temporal: the finite, existing subject repeatedly transcends existence through the intensification of passionate inwardness, only to fall back once again into the mundane: " . . . certainty can be had only in the infinite, where one cannot as an existing subject remain, but only repeatedly arrive."[97]

How is one to reconcile the existential quest for a "genuine certainty," i.e., for a subjective, inward identification with the Infinite, and the equally essential requirement that the authentic individual reflect the ethical ideal of persistent striving?

[94] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 85.

[95] Ibid., p. 84.

[96] Ibid., p. 75.

[97] Ibid. The existential quest for certainty through unity with the Infinite seems to parallel Descartes' attempt to unify certainty and truth, subjectivity and objectivity, through the Idea of God. Yet this is misleading. For Descartes, the Idea of God is essentially prior to the cogito--the doubting self discovers itself as a finite thinker through apprehending itself in the light of the full positivity of the Idea of God. Finite selfhood is thus in a negative relation to the Infinite, but the Infinite is nevertheless "apprehensible" by human reason. For Kierkegaard, however, the finite (ethically inward) subject is the primary presupposition: God is present only negatively--as a lack in the finite, which then motivates and shapes the subject's quest, not for truth, but for self-certainty.

Kierkegaard's contention that "the ethical alone is certain" emits the same aura of ambiguity as the notion of ethical existence itself. The ambiguous question of how to exist authentically (i.e., in the ethical mode) can be reformulated as the question of what it means for the existing individual to achieve a "genuine" certainty.

Considered in relation to the claim that "the infinite and eternal is the only certainty,"[98] the assertion that the "ethical alone is certain" seems to imply that only from within the mode of ethical inwardness can the finite subject approach the eternal truth, and achieve thereby a certain relationship with the Infinite.[99] The ethical, says Kierkegaard, is often abandoned in favor of the "approximation-knowledge" of historical and speculative thinking, because these disciplines erroneously appear to offer access to certain knowledge of the Absolute: "We are deluded by objective knowledge into giving up the certain for the sake of the uncertain."[100] Even in their own terms, the various activities of reflection cannot vanquish skepticism, because they cannot reach the epistemological finality to which they aspire. How much more inadequate do these supposed forms of certainty appear, when one recognizes that they leave out of account "the situation of the knowing subject in existence"?[101] Thus, both in terms of their ultimate results and of their inappropriate starting-point, Kierkegaard dismisses all forms of "positive knowledge" as offering only a "semblance of certainty,"[102] since certainty is genuinely attainable for the existing individual "only in the infinite," where he "cannot remain, but only repeatedly arrive."[103]

While the attainment of certainty through grasping the Eternal Truth is the common goal of both the cognitive subject--represented

[98] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 75.

[99] "God is not an externality but the infinite itself . . . ." Ibid., p. 145; see also ibid., p. 195.

[100] Ibid., p. 137.

[101] Ibid., p. 75.

[102] Ibid.

[103] Ibid.

par excellence by the speculative philosopher--and the ethically existing subject, Kierkegaard contends that a genuine approach to the Infinite is possible only for the ethically inward individual. The unique certainty of ethical life rests on its "true," in the sense of "authentic," relationship to the Infinite. But here the ambivalence which seems to characterize ethical existence reasserts itself. The subject's indirect relationship to God--a relationship predicated upon the essential inwardness and becoming of the existing subject--is a relationship, Kierkegaard claims, which of its very nature cannot be certain:

> . . . in the case of a God-relationship. Precisely because he himself is constantly in process of becoming inwardly, or in inwardness, the religious individual can never use direct communication. . . . Direct communication presupposes certainty; but certainty is impossible for anyone in process of becoming, and the semblance of certainty constitutes for such an individual a deception.[104]

Now it appears here that Kierkegaard contradicts his subsequent assertions that certainty can indeed be had only in the inwardness of ethical becoming, wherein the individual relates authentically to the infinite and eternal. This certainty of the ethical subject he contrasts with the mere "semblance of certainty" attained by the cognitive subject. But if even the finite subject's indirect (ethical) relationship to God is uncertain, what is one to make of the bold claim that "the ethical alone is certain"?

It would seem that the notion of certainty is itself equivocal.[105] On the one hand, Kierkegaard rejects the ideal of metaphysical finality, so that if he equates certainty with the successful accomplishment of an absolute philosophical result, then he can consistently claim that, indeed, no such certainty is possible even for the knower, nor, a fortiori, for the finite existing subject. But on the other hand, he repeatedly insists that there is a mode of "genuine certainty," accessible only to the existing subject, an existential certainty which reflects the condition of the finite

[104] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 68, footnote.

[105] Kierkegaard himself refers to certainty as "dialectically containing the moment of uncertainty."

subject in existence, and which therefore is the sole authentic truth possible for him. But this existential certainty is indefeasibly temporal; thus, the authentically existing subject achieves certainty "only in the Infinite," but it is a certainty to be constantly sought and reenacted, never grasped once and for all.

But to what extent is this notion of an "existential certainty"--a notion intended to offer an alternative to the spurious certainty of objective knowledge--itself nourished by those very ideals and philosophical categories which it would supplant? Does not this ideal of a "genuine" certainty rest not only on the ground of the epistemological distinction between truth and certainty, but also upon an unquestioned assumption that the "unity of finite and infinite" is indeed the only adequate terminus for the ceaseless becoming which is finite human existence? Even if this unity cannot be accomplished once and for all in thought, but is momentary and transient, infinitely to be repeated through the passionate upsurge of the individual's will, yet the persistent striving to "transcend existence" remains the deepest need for the existing subject, as Kierkegaard understands him. If this is so, then it would appear that the very emergence of Kierkegaard's notion of finite, existential subjectivity is intrinsically connected with the philosophical categories he so strongly rejects, and that the attempt to articulate such a notion requires of Kierkegaard not only an authentically ethical (existential) standpoint, but also the implicit adoption of an ontological perspective.[106] This ontological

[106] Heidegger draws a distinction between "ontic," subjective experience and the "ontological" attempt to understand the immediacy of ontic (pre-ontological) existence, and characterizes Kierkegaard's problematic accordingly as still ontic, or "existentiell" in character. Heidegger would say that Kierkegaard was right in seeing his own ethical individual response to existence as discontinuous with the old-style Hegelian ontological reflections, but that he nevertheless still fails to acknowledge the continuity of this "existentiell" perspective with the fundamentally ontological, i.e., the continuity of ethical concerns with the fundamental question of the meaning of Being. See Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, trans., John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), H 235, note vi. My point here, however, is that the maintenance of Kierkegaard's standpoint of ethical inwardness requires, paradoxically, both radical discontinuity with traditional ontological categories, while, at the same time, it draws its negative authority from an implicit allegiance to those same categories.

framework cannot be explicitly developed, since Kierkegaard's starting-point in the radical inwardness of ethical life precludes, in principle, any speculative reflection upon, or direct communications regarding, the concept of Being, or of Eternal Truth:

> . . . the subjective problem is not something about an objective issue, but is the subjectivity itself. For since the problem in question poses a decision, and since all decisiveness . . . inheres in subjectivity, it is essential that every trace of an objective issue should be eliminated.[107]

Yet, the decisive adoption of this subjective mode seems in many respects contingent upon a prior assessment of the nature and limits of traditional philosophical inquiry and its results. Indeed, the existing subject sustains his authentic inwardness through a ceaseless struggle: negatively, to repel the ever-present temptation to seek metaphysical finality, and positively, to seek genuine certainty in a momentary passionate flight to the Eternal Truth. Both these dimensions of authentic existence require of the ethical individual a keen consciousness of the goals and concepts of traditional philosophy, as an essential contrast for the decisive choice of the path of subjective inwardness. The struggle to preserve and enhance one's finite existential subjectivity <u>becomes</u> a struggle only in the light of a fundamental tension between finite, temporal existence and Eternal Truth--a tension which in fact defines the authentically existing subject as a persistently striving seeker after "existential certainty."

One might argue that it is only in the context of the overarching ideal of an eternal truth, of the notion that there is an "existential system for God,"[108] that the vision of the finite subject as a ceaseless, unsystematic becoming acquires the profound significance Kierkegaard attributes to it. In many respects, Kierkegaard's quarrel does not seem to be with the speculative ideal

[107] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 115.

[108] Ibid., p. 107. In the light of such a claim, the <u>nature</u> of existential freedom seems ambiguous. For, if indeed there is an existential system for God, then this would appear to undermine the radical freedom of the exister, whose "becoming" then is still necessary, from God's point of view. This is the burden of Sartre's remarks to the effect that <u>either</u> God is, <u>or</u> man is free.

of an identification of finite and infinite: rather, his fear is that man will forget his own finitude and attempt to transcend his most essential humanity. Thus, the subject's persistent quest for a genuine certainty is compounded of his need both for access to eternal truth, in its traditional sense, and for a mode of access that does not undermine the "absolute" reality of finite inwardness.

But this synthesis of traditional ideals with the recognition of the inescapable inwardness and temporality of finite subjectivity means that "certainty" is sought by the existing individual on two conflicting fronts. On the one hand, the existing subject continues to demand that his infinite striving come to rest in the certainty of the infinite, or of Eternal Truth. On the other, however, the radical reorientation toward subjective inwardness, i.e., the affirmation of the primacy of the existing, willing individual over the abstract universality of the cognitive subject, requires equally that the authentically existing subject turn his attention back upon himself, in an effort to realize the truth of this "infinitely valid" inwardness.

The claim "the ethical alone is certain," then, is an expression for an essential ambivalence at the core of the ideal of authentic existence. When Kierkegaard asserts that "the ethical is the absolute"[109] and "as the absolute is infinitely valid in itself,"[110] he does not clarify, but rather deepens this ambiguity. Fundamentally, the statements must be taken to mean that ethical life is the only true life open to an existing individual. But beyond this, difficulties arise. What is the "true" content of ethical life? Is ethical existence an "absolute" because "ethically, the individual subject is infinitely important,"[111] i.e., because the pursuit of subjective inwardness is an "infinite" project? Or is the absoluteness of the ethical rather a function of its significance as the sole mode of existence which can lift the individual momentarily beyond

[109] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 133.

[110] Ibid., p. 127.

[111] Ibid., p. 132.

existence toward the Eternal Truth? Is the pursuit of the "certainty" of ethical inwardness itself "absolute," in the sense of being the overriding aim of authentic human existence, or is the pursuit of ethical certainty absolute only in view of its relationship to the "infinite and eternal"? Is self-realization, through the ceaseless pursuit of self-certain inwardness, the "absolute," the "truth," for the existing subject? Or does the certainty of the ethical only become a genuine certainty when it focuses its persistent striving upon a radically transcendent Eternal Truth? Does "willing the ethical . . . with utmost exertion,"[112] to the point where one "wills absolutely nothing else,"[113] mean that the highest goal for the existing individual is to will himself repeatedly, in his own ethical inwardness?[114] Or is this radical self-willing only "absolute" when oriented toward an authentic (adequately subjective) God-relationship? These questions are not easily resolved, since they give voice to a dilemma whose origins are traceable to the very heart of Kierkegaard's search for a genuine human subjectivity.

Kierkegaard shares with his idealist counterparts the desire to rescue human subjectivity from its sterile bondage to an abstract metaphysical "beyond," to restore human existence to unity with itself, with the concrete world, and with God. This common purpose, however, splinters upon the issue of how such genuine human subjectivity is to be attained. Kierkegaard's answer involves a radical rejection of the speculative quest for a dialectical mediation of finite and infinite Being, and asserts rather that the individual subject, with his irreducible inwardness, his interest in the activity of existing, is the category upon which all the mediating efforts of reason must founder. The ideal of an absolute rational truth for man must yield precedence, he therefore claims, to that

[112] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 123.

[113] Ibid.

[114] "Existence constitutes the highest interest of the existing individual." Ibid., p. 279. "The sole ethical interest is the interest in one's own reality." Ibid., p. 288.

of a knowledge which "inwardly relates itself to existence."[115] This essential knowledge is "ethical and ethico-religious knowledge," which alone manifests an "essential relationship to the existence of the knower."[116] The "ethical alone is certain," therefore, because it alone is an expression of the interest of the existing subject in existing.

But the ideal of a "secure knowledge," which will not "in the last moment transform itself into a hypothesis"[117] is also satisfied, for Kierkegaard, by this certainty of the ethical. Security of knowledge is not something to be found in the activity of existing, however;[118] thus, it would seem that an authentically ethical existence, if its aim is a "secure knowledge," must also somehow orient itself beyond the ceaseless becoming, the "separation of thought and being,"[119] which characterizes the act of existence. Yet one might well ask how such a radically transcendent ideal of Truth could itself authentically be developed, not to mention realized, by a subject immersed in the ceaseless becoming of existence. For if such a subject is infinitely interested in his own subjective inwardness, on what possible basis could he aspire to a "secure knowledge" which "transcends existence"?[120] Yet, the very activity of authentic existing, for Kierkegaard, rests upon the tension between the finite subject's attempts to preserve his individual inwardness, while bringing this inwardness into relationship to the Eternal Truth. The traditional ontological framework, wherein the "certainty" of the subject becomes "truth" (i.e., secure knowledge) when it stands in a secure relationship to the "infinite and eternal," underlies Kierkegaard's elucidation of finite human

[115] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 176. Self-knowing, for Kierkegaard, involves self-choosing. Existing is primarily an act, and so the individual can only know himself through encountering and willing himself within existence--not through contemplating himself sub specie aeternae.

[116] Ibid., p. 177.

[117] Ibid., p. 136.

[118] Ibid., p. 68, footnote.

[119] Ibid., p. 171.

[120] Ibid., p. 176.

existence, therefore.[121] Indeed, it must be presupposed by him, since the "decisiveness" and "anguish" of ethical activity are only invested with significance when the merely temporal, finite subject feels the obligation, or at least the impulse, to struggle toward the Eternal Truth. That this need can be satisfied only through the passionate inwardness of a decisive faith, does not alter the fundamental dependence of this vision of the content and value of finite subjective existence upon categories and ideals which cannot be generated from within an exclusively existential perspective.

The focus of genuine subjectivity is the existing individual's conscious struggle to maintain himself at this standpoint of inwardness--i.e., to will himself, as a being who is immersed in temporality and finitude, a being "in process of becoming," for whom, therefore, " . . . eternity is . . . not eternity, but the future . . . ."[122] Yet, while eternity can only be experienced as futurity by an existing human being, he nevertheless consciously apprehends the limits of finite subjective experience, and this, moreover, in the light of the notion of Eternal Truth. The authentic individual is thus immersed in the flux of becoming, but not unredeemably so, for his conscious willing of finite, ethical existence commits him at one and the same time to the recognition that such existence acquires its unique value through its relationship to the Absolutely Transcendent.

That this relationship cannot be mediated by thought--that the existing individual is, ontologically speaking, absolutely other than the Absolute--does not imply that the finite subject should therefore abandon as hopeless his struggle to appropriate the Eternal Truth. Rather, having acknowledged his condition of separation from the Absolute, the finite subject must passionately will this existential isolation, while also willing, with "the utmost intensity of

[121] In respect of his ultimate goal, then, it seems that Kierkegaard remains firmly within the Cartesian tradition; i.e., he retains the ideal of an absolute unity of certainty and truth, which, for him, is achievable only within and through the freedom of the finite exister. His disagreement with Descartes' ideal concerns rather the method of realizing this desired unity.

[122] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 271.

subjective passion,"[123] to transcend existence toward an existentially-valid appropriation of the Infinite. Both the affirmation of existential isolation and the ceaseless striving to authenticate existence through a God-relationship are fundamentally activities of a subjectivity conceived primarily in terms of ethical will. Yet, it would equally seem that certain metaphysical categories and ideals must be presupposed by such a subject, if existential willing is to maintain its unique significance.

In particular, the conception of Eternal Truth as the "unity of finite and infinite," along with the corresponding ideal of achieving a subjectively certain relationship to this Eternal Truth, continue to function essentially within Kierkegaard's critique of traditional philosophy. Thus, even though the attitude of ethical inwardness must be adopted with radical decisiveness, and can never itself become the content for speculative reflection, yet this ineffable standpoint is sustained in explicit opposition to these categories. Without the "comical" ideal of a final metaphysical truth, for instance, the existential will to witness, and hence preserve, the separation of finite and infinite would collapse. The very meaning of existence as a "struggle," as a challenge to "have the courage to be human," is intrinsically bound up with the finite subject's reflective appreciation of those limits--and aspirations--genuinely expressive of, and satisfying for, an existing human being. The authentic individual valiantly resists the temptation to lose himself in a timeless eternal order, because he has a sound appreciation of what Eternal Truth, considered in itself, must be, and hence recognizes in what respect his own mode of existence falls short of this ideal. The ideal, however, must be preserved; otherwise, existence itself--that "child that is born of the infinite and the finite, the eternal and temporal"--can have no unique significance and value.

Kierkegaard asserts that the authentic individual knows that the ideal of a final metaphysical truth is an illusion, from the standpoint of existence. Why, then, should such a patently

[123] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 270.

illegitimate conception continue even to tempt him? In the light of this knowledge, why should the existential struggle persist? The answer seems to be that such knowledge is not to be had from within the standpoint of subjective existence, which after all is characterized by its preoccupation with its own ineffable inwardness. Rather, the ceaseless striving of existence is fueled by an implicit dependence upon categories which cannot be generated by an existing subject, but which nevertheless motivate existential activity, either negatively--as a temptation to be resisted--or positively--as an ideal to be achieved, but in a uniquely existential way.

The decisive interest of authentic existence is its struggle to "keep open the wound of the negative in existence," i.e., to consciously affirm the individual in his state of existence, of becoming, of separation from the Eternal Truth. Yet, the separation from the Eternal Truth is nevertheless a negative mode of relationship to it--hence, the thought of eternal truth, and the ideal of unity with it, must be present, if the existing subject is to understand himself, and thus function existentially, as a living expression of the absolute otherness of the infinite.[124] The radical decisiveness of the existing individual's resolve to maximize his ethical inwardness acquires its motive and impetus from the recognition that he is absolutely other than the Absolute--a recognition which demands, however, a non-existential conception of the nature of the Absolute, of Eternal Truth, as a basis for asserting one's absolute existential separation from it.

It seems, then, Kierkegaard's rejection of metaphysical thought notwithstanding, that the very turn to subjective inwardness is itself mediated by a reflective assessment of the plight of the finite individual in relation to Eternal Truth, and that this further requires a clear appreciation of the value, for the existing subject, of some form of identification with the Absolute. But, from within the standpoint of subjective inwardness, with its profound emphasis

[124] That the chief goal of ethical existence is self-knowing is a unifying theme in CUP. In Either/Or, however, ethical authenticity is characterized as a decisive self-choosing. Yet these differences of emphasis are reconcilable, since for an exister, knowing himself is choosing himself in his concrete inwardness.

upon passionate willing, any such conceptual activity is suspect, since to dwell upon the categories of thought is to undermine the authentically existential mode of subjective becoming. The subjective problem cannot be raised objectively, since to do so would be to violate the fundamental decisiveness of subjective inwardness. Yet, this decisive standpoint of existence is reached, and sustained, by a reflective, disinterested, elucidation of traditional concepts and ideals. Any direct reflection upon the nature of Absolute Reality is prohibited for the existing subject; nevertheless, the finite individual's struggle to achieve the "certainty" of ethical inwardness is linked to his quest for an authentic God-relationship, a relationship whose quality is defined by the non-existential character of that which the finite subject seeks to appropriate existentially:

> . . . God does not exist, He is eternal. Man thinks and exists, and existence separates thought and being . . . .[125]

This, says Kierkegaard, constitutes the "absolute difference between God and Man,"[126] and accounts for the persistent striving which is the sole authentic mode for an existing individual. Yet, clearly, such a mode presupposes that this existing individual's very inwardness, the passionate intensity of his effort to appropriate the Eternal Truth, be grounded a priori in a conception of God as he in whom thought and being are indeed actually united:

> This conformity of thought with being is actually realized for God, but it is not realized for any existing spirit, who is himself existentially in process of becoming.[127]

Thus, the speculative Idea of God as the eternal identity of thought and being maintains a pivotal position in the development of existential inwardness. The particular claim that the truth, for man (who is essentially a finite, temporal subjectivity), cannot be the identity of thought and being but rather must be sought in the difference between the human and divine, is a claim whose coherence

[125] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 296.

[126] Ibid., p. 195.

[127] Ibid., p. 170.

rests upon a universal conception of what truth, as such, must be. This radical distinction between a specifically, and uniquely, existential truth (i.e., truth as subjectivity, as the self-certainty of ethical inwardness, as a persistent striving to preserve the existential separation of thought and being) and truth-in-itself, is, however, one which cannot be drawn from within the existential perspective itself. Yet, the existential attitude of ceaseless striving to appropriate subjectively the Eternal Truth, is simply empty becoming, unless linked to this wider ontological perspective.

Chapter Four

Willing in the Eminent Sense:

Ethical Inwardness and Existential Freedom

1. Ethical Certainty and Cartesian Doubt: Kierkegaard's Critique of the Cogito

> The facile deification of this pure thought as the highest stage in life shows that the thinker who does it has never existed qua human being. It is evidence among other things that he has never willed in any eminent sense of the word; I do not mean willing in the sense of exploit, but from the standpoint of inwardness. But to have willed in this eminent sense is an absolute condition for having existed as a human being.[1]

Although the individual, by virtue of the very fact that he exists, cannot achieve unity with the Infinite through the mediation of thought, Kierkegaard argues that if only he will assume an attitude genuinely expressive of his condition as an existing individual, the finite subject can nevertheless overcome skepticism, achieving that unity of the infinite and finite which has eluded the "fantastical thinking" of modern philosophy. Blinded by its preoccupation with results, and by its effort to confront Eternal Truth through direct reflection, speculative thinking has ignored that passionate interest in existing which most profoundly characterizes and motivates the individual. While man's cognitive faculties cannot be disregarded, they must assume their proper place in the overall structure of existence. The knower is first an existing individual, whose cognitive pursuits are therefore grounded in the primary freedom of existing itself. Knowledge which loses sight of its roots in the existential freedom of the

[1] Kierkegaard, CUP, pp. 269-270.

individual, which tries to transform the concreteness of lived subjectivity into a "chimera of abstraction," a "fantastic I-am-I," only succeeds in making itself comical.

The existing individual, therefore, must constantly preserve himself at the standpoint of finitude, of ethical inwardness, rather than seeking fruitlessly to relieve himself of the burden of existence. Most importantly, he must recognize that while the disjunction he experiences between finite and infinite is indeed irreducible, it is the very separation of these elements which constitutes the dynamic structure of existence itself. Thus, the existential tension between finite and infinite cannot legitimately be viewed as merely a stage in the progress of the finite individual towards a final, higher dialectical synthesis, without destroying the very sense of what it means to exist. Existential subjectivity is constituted by the difference between lived existence and that absolute reality toward which existing individuals essentially orient themselves. Authentic existential reality, therefore, is marked by the ceaseless struggle of the finite, temporal individual to express this awareness in his existence, and correspondingly, to forego any attempt to transfigure the discontinuities and turmoil of existence into a tranquil image of eternity.

Yet, when Kierkegaard says that "the ethical alone is certain," he is claiming that within this temporal activity of subjective self-realization--and only there--the existing individual encounters reality in a mode which is not susceptible to the skepticism and despair implicit in both empiricist and idealist thought. In true Cartesian fashion, Kierkegaard affirms that the sole reality to which we have more than an indirect--hence uncertain--relationship is the existence of the self: "Nothing historical can become infinitely certain for me except the fact of my own existence . . . ."[2]

[2] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 75; see also Søren Kierkegaard, Either/Or, 2 vols., trans., Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944; rpt. New York: Doubleday and Co. Inc., 1959), II, p. 269. "Precisely when one perceives that personality is the absolute, is its own end and purpose, is the unity of the universal and particular, precisely then will all scepticism which takes the historical as the point of departure be effectively overcome."

But this irreducible "fact of my own existence" is not, as it is for Descartes, the final discovery of a doubting thinker, whose skepticism, Kierkegaard maintains, is always of a limited, relative variety, since it inevitably presupposes the irreducible certainty of the self in existence:

> The basic certainty that supports doubt cannot hypostatize itself as long as I doubt, for doubt consists precisely in departing from this certainty in order to doubt. If I continue to doubt, I shall be forever unable to transcend it, since doubt consists in a false interpretation of the basic certainty. If for a single moment I hold fast to this basic certainty as certainty, I must for that moment cease to doubt.[3]

Descartes never suggested that, existentially, he could seriously doubt even the slightest detail of his own concrete existence, or indeed, much of his actual experience of reality as a whole. His aim was not to dissolve the individual's existential certainty of self and world, but to discover, if possible, a metaphysically solid foundation for this unreflected confidence. Kierkegaard, however, argues that this initial departure from existential self-certainty in the interests of a "higher" mode of certainty already is an unwarranted abstraction from the genuine reality of lived subjective existence, and generates a false appreciation of what it is to be a self. Indeed, for Kierkegaard, nothing real can be grasped directly--hence with ultimate certainty--by thought. Conceptual activity, whatever its intention, unavoidably generates a distance between the subject and the content he wishes to apprehend, so that the abstract thinker necessarily adopts an attitude of detachment toward "known" reality, and is in principle unable to coincide with his object, which alone would ensure that he directly apprehends it as it is:

> What reality is cannot be expressed in the language of abstraction. . . . Abstract thought can get hold of reality only by nullifying it, and this nullification of reality consists in transforming it into possibility. All that is said about reality in the language of abstraction and within the sphere of abstract thought, is really said within the sphere of the possible. The entire realm of abstract thought, speaking in the language of reality, sustains the relation of possibility to the realm of

[3] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 299, footnote.

> reality; but this latter reality is not one which is included within abstract thought and the realm of the possible.[4]

This general limitation upon thinking's claim to know reality holds even more strongly, Kierkegaard asserts, when the intended object of thought is the self:

> An abstract thinker exists, to be sure, but this fact is rather a satire on him than otherwise. For an abstract thinker to try to prove his existence by the fact that he thinks, is a curious contradiction; for in the degree that he thinks abstractly he abstracts from his own existence. In so far his existence is revealed as a presupposition from which he seeks emancipation; but the act of abstraction nevertheless becomes a strange sort of proof of his existence, since if it succeeded entirely his existence would cease.[5]

Since the abstract thinker himself is always in process of becoming, he cannot step outside his own temporal self-experience in order to reflect absolutely, through radical doubt, upon the limits and significance of his subjectivity. Kierkegaard does not claim that abstract thought therefore provides no meaningful access to reality; but he argues that this access is always second-order, because the very act of reflection transmutes the individual's concrete experience into a conceptual form, into a "possibility" over against which the thinker maintains an attitude of detachment. But one cannot preserve such a disinterested, or critical, stance toward one's own individual existence, because precisely this "lived subjectivity" provides the secure basis upon which all subsequent reflection, either about oneself or the reality of the world, proceeds:

> With respect to every reality other than the individual's own reality, the principle obtains that he can come to know it only by thinking it. With respect to his own reality, it is a question whether his thought can succeed in abstracting from it completely. But it avails him nothing, since he still exists; and this existential persistence . . . is an epigram upon the abstract thinker.[6]

[4] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 279. Much later, existential phenomenology--beginning with Husserl's last work, The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology--develops this Kierkegaardian intimation of the irreducible primacy of the "life-world," i.e., the concrete unity of self and world, of which all conceptual reflection is an abstraction, or an interpretative perspective.

[5] Ibid., p. 281.

[6] Ibid., p. 282.

Kierkegaard, then, retains the Cartesian ideal of a certain foundation for knowledge; he further agrees that only a turn toward subjectivity offers such a foundation. However, he strongly criticizes the Cartesian view that thinking is the medium through which genuine certainty may be discovered. On the contrary, he argues, all thought is a project rooted in the concrete existential interest of the individual subject, so that it is this "inwardness of the spirit," this ceaseless concern to freely actualize oneself as an existing subject, which constitutes that secure knowledge of an irreducible reality, of which the cogito is merely a shadow:

> The ethical alone is certain; to concentrate upon the ethical yields the only knowledge which may not possibly in the last moment transform itself into an hypothesis; to exist in the ethical constitutes the only secure knowledge . . . .[7]
>
> Existence constitutes the highest interest of the existing individual and his interest in existence constitutes his reality.[8]

In contrast to all other knowledge of reality, which, Kierkegaard says, is conceptual, hence indirect, a "possibility" for the existing knower, the knowledge the individual possesses of his own, ethical, inwardness is unique. Only to himself, in his own concrete inwardness, does the existing subject possess a relationship which cannot be reduced to the language of possibility, of abstract thought. His self-knowledge is based upon more than cognition; rather, it is a knowing which is inseparable from the activity of becoming a self. For this reason, Kierkegaard insists, existential self-experience is more concrete, therefore more certain, than any reality which we may mediate through the idealizing activity of thought:

> . . . ethical reality is the only reality which does not become a mere possibility through being known, and which can be known only through being thought; for it is the individual's own reality . . . .[9]

[7] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 136.

[8] Ibid., p. 279.

[9] Ibid., p. 284.

> All knowledge about reality is possibility. The only reality to which an existing individual may have a relation that is more than cognitive is his own reality, the fact that he exists. . . . The only reality that exists for an existing individual is his own ethical reality. To every other reality he stands in a cognitive relation . . . .[10]

From Kierkegaard's viewpoint, Descartes misconstrues the implications of his own meditations, when he seeks to ground reality in the tautologous thought of the cogito. It is of the very essence of intellectual reflection to be disinterested, indifferent to concrete particularity, or personal selfhood. This, indeed, is the very strength of the abstract thinker, for whom considerations of an individual nature constitute merely a hindrance to the achievement of objective knowledge. Such a method, then, already in principle cuts off the thinker from his own and others' actual individual existence. And yet, argues Kierkegaard, unless the existence of a genuinely concrete selfhood is somehow assured, we are left with a tautologous "I think" as the sole basis for a comprehensive vision of reality.

If I intend my thought to be brought into relation with the concrete actuality of self and world--as indeed Descartes does--then, says Kierkegaard, in that very subjective resolve is already implicit an interested involvement with reality, which cannot itself be effectively transmuted through the idealizing power of thought. It is here, then, in the ethical self-interest of the existing individual, rather than in the thought-construct which is the cogito, that genuine, self-verifying reality can alone be located:

> There is only one interest, the interest in existence; disinterestedness is therefore an expression for indifference to reality. This indifference is forgotten in the Cartesian cogito ergo sum, which injects a disturbing influence into the disinterestedness of the intellectual and affronts speculative thought, as if it were instrumental to something else. I think ergo I think; but whether I exist or it exists in the sense of an actuality, so that "I" means an individually existing human being . . . is a matter of infinite indifference. That the content of my thought exists in the conceptual sense needs no proof . . . since it is proved by my thinking it. But as

[10] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 280.

> soon as I begin to impose a teleology on my thought, and bring it into relation with something else, interest begins to play a role in the matter. The instant this happens the ethical is present, and absolves one from any responsibility in proving my own existence. It forbids me to draw a conclusion which is ethically deceitful and metaphysically unclear, by imposing upon me the duty of existing.[11]

The instant one recognizes the irreducibility of the individual subject's interest in existence, the metaphysical goal of seeking a foundation for reality through thought reveals itself as superfluous, and indeed as an impossible task for an existing, finite subject. The genuine certainty of lived subjectivity is essentially prior to all attempts to conceptualize reality, and therefore invalidates in advance any metaphysical undertaking which would reduce concrete, ethical reality through reflection to simply another "possibility." Only the ethically-existing subject has access to a reality which is unmediated by thought; thus, only in ethical inwardness is an unchallengeable certainty to be discovered:

> The real subject is not the cognitive subject, since in knowing he moves in the sphere of the possible; the real subject is the ethically existing subject.[12]

According to Kierkegaard, the certainty to which Descartes aspired could never be achieved in the abstract, idealizing medium in which he sought it. The very attempt to develop a definitive body of metaphysical propositions concerning human subjectivity is self-refuting, since the subject who undertakes such a project is already a concretely self-certain individual, whose existential freedom must be assumed as a basis for any such project, and from whose temporal, finite perspective no metaphysical result can be authentically accepted as final.

From Kierkegaard's point of view, one might say that Descartes in fact "misuses his freedom" when he attempts, through methodical doubt, to hold in abeyance the genuine--because directly lived and constantly relived--certainties of the ethically existing individual. In opposition to Descartes, for whom, in the sphere of ethics,

[11] Kierkegaard, CUP, pp. 282-283. [Final emphasis mine.]

[12] Ibid., p. 281.

objective uncertainty prevails, so that the best one can hope for is resolutely to maintain one's orientation toward rationality in all one's ethical dealings, Kierkegaard insists that "the ethical alone is certain." This is because the concrete inwardness of the ethical standpoint alone is not susceptible to abstraction, to the "approximation-processes" of thought, hence to skepticism:

> What the sceptics should really be caught in is the ethical. Since Descartes, they have all thought that during the period in which they doubted, they dared not express anything definite with regard to knowledge, but on the other hand, they dared to act, because in this respect they could be satisfied with probability. What an enormous contradiction! As if it were not far more dreadful to do something about which one is doubtful (thereby incurring responsibility) than to make a statement. Or was it because the ethical is in itself certain? But then there was something which doubt could not reach![13]

Kierkegaard therefore preserves the Cartesian ideal of a certain starting-point for human knowledge, but he transfers the locus of the certain from the self-verifying thought of the cogito to the free, self-actualizing inwardness of lived, ethical subjectivity. It is this concrete, individual spirituality alone which "doubt cannot reach," since the activity of doubting itself is a mode of the existing subject's ethical interest in existence, and not what it claims to be, a neutral method for uncovering the pure foundation of certainty, and ultimately of truth.

Descartes advised that the individual who would act well in the world should "have a firm and constant resolution to do all which reason counsels,"[14] even if, because of the bifurcated nature of reality, rational action in the world of extension is often thwarted. It is, he argues, the "firmness of the resolution" itself which "must be taken as virtue"--a sentiment which is clearly echoed in Kierkegaard's view that in ethical matters, it is the energy, the passion of one's willing, which is significant. However, Descartes' firm resolution is explicitly linked with the ideal of achieving rational truth, even

[13] Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers, Vol. I, trans. and ed., Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1967), p. 358, #774.

[14] Descartes, Discourse on the Method, p. 265.

in the uncertain sphere of ethical life. Therefore Cartesian resolve is never self-justifying, but is the appropriate attitude of will for a subject who seeks to actualize his rational freedom, as far as possible, in relation to the blind externality and necessity of the objective order. Descartes' ideal of self-mastery, indicated in the stoic assertion that "there is nothing entirely within our power but our own thoughts" is inseparably linked with his metaphysical position that freedom and rationality are reciprocal aspects of human subjectivity. It further reinforces the dualism between this free rational selfhood, on the one hand, and the determined world of extension, on the other. Ethical freedom is rational freedom; control over one's thoughts enables one to master the infinite, abstract capacity of the subjective will which, left to itself, fails to distinguish in its choosing between the true and the merely certain, and thus generally leads the self into confusion. For Descartes, then, genuine ethical selfhood must be pursued within the context of a prior metaphysical understanding of subjectivity as a concrete unity of reason and freedom, which exists in a dualistic relationship to the objective order of materiality.

For Kierkegaard, precisely this attempt to establish the primacy of a metaphysical, rational construct (the cogito) over concrete ethical selfhood constitutes the loss of any access to genuine certainty, and generates the subsequent skepticism of post-Cartesian philosophy. In a move intended to reverse the order of the relationship between ethical and metaphysical categories, and therefore to undo the "metaphysical deception" which sees the individual's irreducibly real ethical inwardness as necessarily subordinated to rational self-consciousness and its cognitive world of "possibilities," Kierkegaard therefore insists: "The ethical alone is certain."

2. Kant and Kierkegaard on Ethical Willing

When the question of truth is raised by an existing subject, he argues, the way of objective reflection--the way which seeks to unify subjective certainty and objective truth--leads only to contradiction and failure, because the price paid for objectivity is the

loss of existential selfhood, that very selfhood in whose interest the question is raised. The alternative, Kierkegaard suggests, is for the individual to become "subjectively reflective":

> The way of objective reflection . . . at its maximum this way will lead to the contradiction that only the objective has come into being, while the subjective has gone out; that is to say, that existing subjectivity has vanished, in that it has made an attempt to become what in the abstract sense is called subjectivity, the mere abstract form of an abstract objectivity.[15]

Kierkegaard contrasts this abstract subjectivity, which is only an idea of subjectivity, with the concreteness of the actually existing individual. He asserts that only if man focuses upon the genuine certainty of subjective inwardness, in its characteristic modes of expression, will alienation and skepticism give way to a truth which is not indifferent to the reality of the questioning subject. Such truth cannot be sought through the mediation of pure thought, which would dispel as "accidental" the ontological disjunction which lies at the core of finite existence. Rather, human truth is a function of subjective reflection, which "holds fast to what it means to be a human being"[16] by "turn[ing] its attention inwardly to the subject, and desir[ing] in this intensification of inwardness to realize the truth."[17] Here, not the Cartesian identity of being and thought, but the very "subjectivity of the subject becomes the final stage."[18] When subjective reflection "makes its way inwardly in inwardness,"[19] its central intention is to enhance subjectivity, by focusing not upon the truth of the content of reflection, but upon the manner and mode of the individual's relationship to the truth:

> When the question of the truth is raised subjectively, reflection is directed subjectively to the nature of the individual's relationship; if only the mode of this relationship is in the truth, the individual is in the truth, even if he should happen to be thus related to what is not true.[20]

[15] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 173.

[16] Ibid., p. 177.

[17] Ibid., p. 175.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid., p. 177.

[20] Ibid., p. 178.

For the mode of one's relationship to the truth to be itself "in the truth," the individual must exist in a state of passionate inwardness. But this does not imply that the content to which the individual is so related is a matter of indifference. Kierkegaard is not claiming that subjectivity is an adequate criterion for all truths, such that no proposition is true unless it is willed with passion. Only when the individual is concerned with the "truth which is essentially related to existence,"[21] does existential inwardness become the hallmark of truth. There are many contexts where objective reflection, and its accompanying suppression of individual inwardness, are entirely appropriate--as, for instance, when gathering scientific data. Further, the significance of passionate inwardness would be entirely misconstrued if one claimed that any objective content becomes true, if only the individual holds fast to it with sufficient intensity. At its extreme limits, says Kierkegaard, this position confuses the inwardness of insanity with the authentic inwardness of the existing subject. In the first case, the individual embraces some finite object with the passionate intensity characteristic of the fanatic, who clings to "some little finitude" as if it were the absolute.[22] But in the case of the authentically existing individual, his subjectivity is truth because through it, he relates himself with infinite passion to the Infinite. There is no incongruity between the authentic mode of passionate inwardness and its content; the individual who is in the truth is essentially characterized by his ethico-religious interest in transcending existence toward the absolute, so that his passionate intensity is not to be confused with the turbulent strivings of a merely particular individuality:

[21] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 178, footnote. Kierkegaard here explicitly mentions that he exaggerates the contrast between the subjective "how" and its content, in order to clarify the difference between subjective and objective reflection.

[22] Ibid., p. 174. This whole question is explored in Kierkegaard's religious work, Purity of Heart, where the singlemindedness of faith is distinguished from the fanaticism of a mere worldly sincerity, love, or devotion to a cause. There, Kierkegaard speaks of "The Good" as the appropriate object of the pure will; in CUP, it is the Absolute, or the Eternal Truth which holds this position.

> . . . in this strenuous exertion there is nevertheless a tranquillity and a peace; for absolutely, and with all one's strength, and the renunciation of everything else, to maintain a relationship to the absolute telos is no contradiction, but is the absolute correspondence of like to like. The tortured self-contradiction of worldly passion arises from the attempt to sustain an absolute relation to a relative telos . . . for it is precisely the most general expression for madness that the individual has an absolute relationship to what is relative.[23]

The standpoint which raises subjective inwardness to its maximum degree of intensity--to the passion of the infinite--and hence, wherein the existing individual is most assuredly himself, because he stands in an appropriate relationship to the Eternal Truth, is the standpoint of faith: "Faith is the highest passion in the sphere of human subjectivity."[24] The inwardness of this ethico-religious perspective is carefully distinguished from the arbitrary willfullness of worldly passion, or fanaticism. Nevertheless, the culmination of ethical inwardness in the passionate intensity of faith dramatically separates reason and will in a fashion unparallelled, for example, by Kant's analyses of the relations between rationality, freedom, and faith.

For both Kierkegaard and Kant, the ethical perspective is profoundly linked with that of the believer; yet, the justification for the relationship rests on divergent assessments of the nature of ethical selfhood. For Kant, the autonomy of the ethical individual rests on his capacity to bring the merely personal imperatives of his finite, particular will under the guidance of a priori principles of reason. The good will is thus a rational will, and freedom without reason a contradiction of the very conception of an ethical life. Moral ideals, therefore, cannot ultimately conflict with rational ideals:

> A need of pure practical reason . . . is based on a duty to make something (the summum bonum) the object of my will so as to promote it with all my strength. In doing so, I must presuppose its possibility and also its conditions, which are God, freedom and immortality. . . . This duty is based on an apodictic law, the moral law, which is independent of these presuppositions, and thus needs no

[23] Kierkegaard, CUP, pp. 377-378.

[24] Ibid., p. 118.

> further support from theoretical opinions . . . the subjective effect of this law, i.e., the intention which is suitable to this law and which is necessary because of it, the intention to promote the practically possible highest good at least presupposes that the latter is possible.[25]

Since only the possibility of the existence of God and eternal life can adequately satisfy the a priori goals of a rational, yet temporal, finite ethical self, these transcendent Ideas of Reason must be postulated as the rationally required prius for ethical existence. Faith in the existence of God, and in an eternal happiness, is for Kant a rational faith: a faith, because no objective, empirical evidence can possibly provide the basis for knowledge of the Infinite; but, nevertheless, rational, because essentially bound up with the a priori law of morality. Between the ethical and religious standpoints, therefore, Kant recognizes a strong continuity, grounded in the universality of reason. Faith cannot radically contradict morality, because it is precisely by following through on the implications of his ethical freedom that the finite individual comes to appreciate the full importance and urgent necessity of belief in God. Thus, while Kant indeed limited knowledge in order to make room for faith, this did not result in a paradoxical cleavage between reason and the will, nor between reason and faith. Rather, reason itself demands access to a noumenal order beyond knowledge, a demand clearly evident in ethical life. The rational autonomy of ethical subjectivity points beyond itself toward the transcendent reality of God and eternal life, so that the ethical individual, by virtue of his ethical freedom itself, is implicitly, at least, already securely related to an eternal, divine order.[26]

The life of faith is thus, for Kant, not a life of radical decisiveness, in Kierkegaard's sense that only a paradoxical leap beyond the bounds of reason can bring the subject into adequate

[25] Kant, CPrR, p. 143.

[26] That this implicit relationship remains always a "beyond," unattainable to finite man, constitutes what Hegel criticizes as the fundamental "subjective idealism" of Kant's position--a subjectivity which clearly becomes extreme with Kierkegaard's severing of any intrinsic bond between the faithful exister and the Divine.

relation with God. While the object of faith, for both Kant and Kierkegaard, is an unknowable reality, with Kant, one need not shipwreck one's reason in the attempt to reach the Absolute. The standpoint of the ethical itself mediates between the human subject and the divine, because, as a standpoint grounded in reason, the ethical perspective raises the mere arbitrary, finite will of the individual into connection with reason as such. Further, this rationally free individual is led to postulate, as a condition of the possibility of a completed rationality and morality, the practical necessity of God and immortality. The hope and faith of the finite believer is thus rooted in his ethical freedom, while it equally points beyond finite ethical experience toward a final unity with the Infinite.

While Kierkegaard rejects any suggestion that a decisive faith can be confused with an arbitrary exaggeration of the particular will,[27] with respect to some relative end, he nevertheless drastically distinguishes the roles of reason and the will in the existence of the finite subject. Thus, the difference between the distorted self-will of the fanatic and the infinite, passionate willing of the authentic believer cannot be clarified, as in Kant, by identifying the will of the latter with universal rationality. Kierkegaard's ethical subject is a subject whose central obligation is neither the passionate willing of personal, heteronomously selected possibilities, nor actions done for the sake of duty, in accordance with the categorical imperative of reason, but an existing individual, dedicated to self-realization, to becoming who he (potentially) is, i.e., a self-consciously finite individual, existing in the mode of ever-deepening inwardness.[28] To become oneself, however, requires

[27] See above, pp. 157-158.

[28] See Kierkegaard, CUP, pp. 116-117. This contrast between Kant and Kierkegaard's understanding of duty is strongly expressed by one recent interpreter of Kierkegaard, George J. Stack, Kierkegaard's Existentialist Ethics (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1977), who remarks: "If there is anything like a categorical imperative in Kierkegaard's writings, it is: Become an authentic self" (p. 165). One's primary ethical duty is thus not "posited by man as a purely rational being" but "chosen with passion and energy by a particular actual being who is concerned with his own existence" (p. 168).

that one's finite existence be related to the Infinite, for the striving of existence precisely is the dialectical tension between temporal becoming and the Eternal. Thus, the ethical subject is most fully himself (i.e., ethically inward) when he wills most passionately to be himself: to be an existing individual, or one who lives in existential, therefore passionate, relationship to God. Ethical selfhood, therefore, achieves its highest degree of realization when the existing subject momentarily transcends existence through the passionate inwardness of faith.

The ethical and the religious modes of existence are thus linked for Kierkegaard as they are for Kant. Both affirm the ethical subject's "need" for God and immortality, but since their assessments of the nature of ethical subjectivity differ profoundly, the manner in which faith both emerges from and yet transcends ethical selfhood is equally divergent. Kant's ethical subject is such by virtue of his rationality. The need such a subject experiences is thus a "need of reason" rather than the need of a particular individual, which, for Kant, would be a mere "need of inclination."[29] Further, this need is founded on the moral duty "to make something (the summum bonum) the object of my will . . .,"[30] so that it is really in the interest of rendering this moral need intelligible that the ethical subject postulates God, immortality, and freedom, as necessary conditions of its possible attainment. Without these postulates, i.e., that there is a necessary Being, God, who is the "moral Author of the world,"[31] and that the ethical subject may anticipate eternal life, it would be "practically impossible" to strive, within finite existence, to bring to fruition the moral ideal, since the concept of the summum bonum "at bottom would be empty and without an object."[32]

[29] Kant, CPrP, p. 142, footnote.

[30] Ibid., p. 142.

[31] Ibid., p. 145.

[32] Ibid., p. 143.

In sharp contrast to this Kantian perspective, Kierkegaard's ethical subject is defined precisely by his particularity, by his concrete individuality, so that to strive to actualize himself as inwardness, as a finite, particular subject, is his highest moral ideal:

> . . . to will to live as a particular human being (which everyone undoubtedly is) in the same sense as is open to every other human being, is the ethical victory over life and all its illusions.[33]
>
> The task of becoming subjective, then, may be presumed to be the highest task, and one that is proposed to every human being . . . .[34]
>
> The ethical is concerned with particular human beings, and with each and every one of them by himself. . . . The ethical lays hold of each individual and demands that he refrain from all contemplation, especially of humanity and the world . . . .[35]

The consistent theme of these passages is that while the existing individual is irreducibly a particular finite subject, precisely the preservation and enhancement of this particularity imposes a universal ethical task upon humanity. "Every human being," says Kierkegaard, "must be assumed to be in essential possession of what essentially belongs to being a man."[36] Further, each ethically existing individual must strive to "transform himself into an instrument that clearly and definitely expresses in existence whatever is essentially human."[37] These claims bear a superficial analogy to Kant's assertion that the particular ethical subject is most fully himself when he transcends his particularity, by choosing in accordance with what is right for humanity as a whole. However, while Kant regards reason as the essentially human, Kierkegaard (although he retains the concept of the "essence" of humanity) sees in the universality of reason a barrier to achieving full ethical selfhood and freedom. The existing subject is irremediably particular; thus, any attempt to mediate

[33] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 319.

[34] Ibid., p. 146.

[35] Ibid., p. 284.

[36] Ibid., p. 318.

[37] Ibid.

this particularity through an appeal to an abstract concept like "humanity as such" merely strips existence of its genuine reality and value as passionate, decisive striving.

Following Kant, Kierkegaard regards the perfection of the ethical will itself, rather than the attainment of concrete results, however worthy, as the supreme concern of ethical life:

> The true ethical enthusiasm consists in willing to the utmost limits of one's powers. . . . As soon as the will begins to look right and left for results, the individual begins to become immoral. The energy of the will is slackened; or it is abnormally developed in the direction of an unwholesome and unethical craving, greedy for reward, and even if it accomplishes what is great, it does not do so ethically; the individual still demands something more than the ethical itself.[38]

But for Kant, the ethical subject manifests a will which is good in itself when he measures his individual inclinations and aspirations against his rational appreciation of what would be valid for humanity as a whole. For Kierkegaard, on the other hand, the distinctive universality of ethical life inheres in its capacity to repeatedly express what it is open to any and every individual to express, i.e., the radical inwardness and finite becoming of subjective existence. Insofar as we are one and all "a bit of a subject,"[39] all particular individuals, all "inward," in a rudimentary way, we share a common humanity. But when the existing subject strives to perfect that subjectivity, to express existentially "what he already is,"[40] his most fundamental ideal is not to bring into actuality the concept of the "summum bonum," the unity of reason and nature. Rather, he embarks on an ethical quest which leads him away from the universality of rational contemplation in the direction of an ever-deepening inwardness, towards the manifestation of an authentic subjectivity which eludes all conceptualization. Kierkegaard's ethical subject thus indeed asserts the intrinsic value of the ethical will itself; however, his view of what constitutes genuinely human willing focuses upon the finite and particular, upon the "passion" and "energy" of the

[38] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 121.

[39] Ibid., p. 116.

[40] Ibid.

subject's will, rather than, as with Kant, upon the finite subject's ideal membership in a rational kingdom of ends.[41]

In the light of this comparison, it is tempting to construe Kierkegaard's call to inwardness as the egoistic outpourings of one who wishes to aggrandize the merely personal, or arbitrarily individual, elements of human subjectivity. His rejection of any overriding bond between reason's Ideas and the individual will seems to support this view. Nevertheless, the subjective willing with which Kierkegaard identifies ethical reality, while it cannot be absorbed within the all-comprehensive unity of the rational, is not reducible to the merely contingent, heteronomous purposes of Kant's empirical self. Kierkegaard consistently affirms, to be sure, that "The ethical is . . . a correlative to individuality, and that to such a degree that each individual apprehends the ethical essentially only in himself . . . ."[42] However, his notion of individuality has nothing in common with the infinite observable differences among empirical individuals, nor with the innumerable variations of personal preferences and interests which internally distinguish individual egos. Individuality has little to do with these "objective" differentia; in fact, Kierkegaard is as eager as Kant that such empirical singularity should come under the tutelage of genuine ethical selfhood and freedom.

[41] Kant's ethical subject's "need" of God is a need based upon reason's demand that its practical goals find justification and a hope of completion. The ethical subject is thus led to postulate the Idea of God, the concept of a "moral author of the world," who is, therefore, one with universal reason. Kierkegaard, however, claims that the existing, ethical individual's "need" is for God himself, for a "living God," a Subject to whom the individual subject can relate in passionate inwardness. Faith is therefore not rational, for Kierkegaard, although it remains a need of the ethical self that he find completion in God.

[42] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 138. For Kant, and, indeed, for Descartes, the "ethical" is bound up with selfhood--but only insofar as the will of the individual, with its abstractly infinite capacity to act out of self-interest, is guided by reason. For Kierkegaard, however, genuine selfhood occupies a position above reason, considered as "the universal." The individual becomes such through his relationship to God, who, however, is not simply a first rational principle, but an Absolute Subject.

His complaint against Kantianism is that such selfhood is not to be discovered by identifying oneself with a priori laws of reason. From Kierkegaard's viewpoint, this would be simply to fall in with "the admired wisdom of our own age, that it is the task of the subject increasingly to divest himself of his subjectivity in order to become more and more objective."[43] Of course, if all that one means by subjectivity is "the accidental, the angular, the selfish, the eccentric,"[44] then, indeed, such spurious subjectivity has no place within ethical existence, and it is perhaps understandable that such an inadequate appreciation of the genuinely subjective life should foster a turn toward objectivity and rational contemplation. However, Kierkegaard argues, the subjectivity of ethical existence has nothing in it of the arbitrary or the relative, no "unwholesome, frivolous and cowardly concern for the accidental."[45] Rather, the ethical is intent upon developing man's essential subjectivity, by sustaining that concrete "inwardness of the spirit" which is beset by temptations to skepticism, self-alienation, and despair in a world preoccupied with the ideals of speculative reason.

Kierkegaardian subjective inwardness, then, is not distinguished from the objectivity of rational thought by the peculiarity, or the quantitative singularity, of its content. Neither is it necessarily exemplified in the subject's idiosyncracies of demeanor, or attitude, toward the world, or toward objective thought-content. The inwardness of existence is essentially the same for all, while yet the experience of inwardness is ineffable, and can be only indirectly appreciated, even by other existing individuals.[46] One cannot, then, legislate a priori, universally for others, since all individuals are essentially characterized by an inaccessible "inwardness of spirit," such that choices made in the name of "objective" concepts like "humanity as a whole" are choices which contradict, rather than fulfill

[43] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 117.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid., p. 120.

[46] Ibid., p. 286; see also p. 320.

or manifest our essential humanity. The individual who exists in ethical inwardness is thus an "exemplar" of our essential humanity; but, by that very fact, he is prevented from bringing the universality of his ethical selfhood to conceptual (objective) determination.[47]

In a sense, the "inwardness of spirit" with which Kierkegaard equates ethical subjectivity is more formal, more empty of content, than is the rational willing which characterizes Kant's ethical self, and which Kierkegaard wishes to leave behind for the concreteness of finite subjectivity. He highlights the unique inwardness of the authentic individual's will by insisting that, in the sphere of the ethico-religious, the content of such a will (i.e., the "what" of the subject's choosing) is of secondary importance to the subjective "how" of appropriation:

> In the ethico-religious sphere, the accent is again on the "how." But this is not to be understood as referring to demeanour, expression, or the like; rather, it refers to the relationship sustained by the existing individual, in his own existence, to the content of his utterance. Objectively, the interest is focused merely on the thought content, subjectively on the inwardness.[48]

The subjective "how" has no salient features by which its presence may be detected or confirmed; ethical inwardness is an entirely unobservable mode. Those individuals who display extreme emotional intensity, or who proclaim themselves as passionate upholders of individual freedom, for instance, may be the least ethically inward, the least passionate, of all, since the empirical appearance of the self has no intrinsic relation to the truth of one's spiritual condition.[49] The courageously ethical individual recognizes that

[47] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 274. "Existence . . . is a difficult category to deal with; for if I think it, I abrogate it, and then I do not think it. It might therefore seem to be the proper thing to say there is something which cannot be thought--namely, existence." See also ibid., pp. 280-284 and 292-295.

[48] Ibid., p. 181.

[49] When Kierkegaard links "passion" with radical inwardness, he does not intend to identify it with mere subjective self-feeling, which would be inwardness, but only of an entirely arbitrary and private sort. Genuine ethical passion is grounded, for Kierkegaard, not in any relative content, even the subject's own emotions or ideals, but solely in the exister's personal relationship to the Eternal Truth.

no one can judge the truth of his existential choices by objective standards. In this respect, Kierkegaard echoes Kant, in distinguishing empirical selfhood from ethical subjectivity. But while Kant's ethical self can know neither himself nor others as they really are (i.e., in their noumenal freedom), he can determine and evaluate his particular will in the light of the Idea of universal, rational law. Kierkegaard's ethical subject, however, by definition, becomes essentially human, an authentic individual, by "eliminating every trace of an objective issue"[50] which might cloud the radical purity of his decisive inwardness. But if there is a fundamental discontinuity between empirical (physical and psychological) appearance and authentic inwardness, and if, further, the individual can rely on no Kantian-style rational, conceptual ideal to provide a foundation and a criterion for subjective choice, then how is the existing subject to recognize when, and to what extent, his experience reflects the truth of subjective inwardness?

Kierkegaard claims that the ethical mode of existence "alone is certain," and that the goal of authentic existence is to actualize, as far as possible, the concrete truth of ethical self-certainty. But how does the existing subject recognize himself to be in a state of genuine inwardness? Kant's ethical self, to be sure, cannot know himself in his essential reality as a free subject; nor can he be theoretically certain that his individual will ever adequately reflects the Idea of Freedom. However, his self-experience sustains itself in essential relationship to a universal content, since ethical selfhood is apprehended, although not objectively known, through its intrinsic connection with reason itself. Kierkegaard's ethically inward individual, however, is neither empirical nor transcendental, but existential. The truth of existential self-certainty cannot be inferred from positive, empirical evidence, but neither is it grounded in the implicit relationship of the individual will to the Idea of the rational (good) will as such. In what, then, does the concreteness of existential inwardness--and thus its distinction from all merely abstract forms of subjectivity--consist?

[50] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 115.

Chapter Five

Concrete Subjectivity: Kierkegaard's Synthesis of Aesthetic and Ethical Selfhood

> Every man can, if he will, become the paradigmatic man, not by wiping out his accidentality but by remaining in it and ennobling it. But he ennobles it by choosing it.[1]

Kierkegaard draws a crucial distinction between the life of immediate self-experience and the reflected mode of ethical inwardness, referring to the former as the aesthetic stage of existence.[2] The aesthetic individual is deeply concerned with his particular abilities and subjective experiences, such that *prima facie* his life might appear as a paradigm of authentic inwardness. However, aesthetic existence is more readily comparable with Kant's conception of the heteronomous will, which is not genuinely self-determined, but is guided by contingent psychological and empirical motives. Ultimately, the aesthetic individual lacks integrity--he moves among endless possibilities, but commits himself finally to none. Thus, while such a self may appear as highly concrete--after all, he rejects no aspect of reality decisively, but functions as a medium through which myriad experiences flow--Kierkegaard argues that genuinely concrete selfhood eludes him.

But if the concreteness of authentic inwardness does not inhere in the sheer number and variety of the individual's actual experiences, neither can it be grasped by assessing the relation of the individual's will to *a priori* rational principles. Freedom, for

[1] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, II, p. 266.

[2] Kierkegaard's most comprehensive description of this aesthetic mode of existence appears in *Either/Or*, Vol. I, while in Vol. II, the aesthetic mode is juxtaposed with the ethical, so as to emphasize the superior potential of the latter for deepening subjective inwardness, and thus for leading to authentic self-realization.

Kierkegaard, is the core of ethical selfhood--but it is not essentially bound up with contemplative thought. It is the most profound error of speculative philosophy, maintains Kierkegaard, to attempt to mediate the spheres of thought and freedom, spheres which are irreconcilably opposed within existence. For if there is no radical distinction between disinterested deliberation and the concernful decisiveness of the existing subject, if all choices are mediated by reason, and hence emerge through dialectical necessity, then individual responsibility, ethical freedom is an illusion. Between the life of disinterested reflection and the life of ethical inwardness, therefore, there is a wide gulf, which can only be bridged by resolute choice, by a free, unmediated decision, which lifts the individual beyond the uncommitted path of contemplation to a standpoint where authentic self-knowledge becomes possible.

This standpoint of freedom, then, is by no means simply immediately grasped by the existing subject. Immediate experience is the domain of the aesthetic,[3] while free self-existence, the "inwardness of spirit," must be strenuously appropriated. Such freedom cannot be actualized through the mediation of thought, since speculative contemplation, like aesthetic experience, dissipates the concreteness of existential becoming. Between the similarly disinterested modes of aesthetic life and speculative thought,[4] and the committed inwardness of the ethical, there is an absolute either/or. Thus, the individual who would transcend the sphere of the aesthetic confronts a radical choice, not between various particular actions, some good and others evil, but between two views of what it is to be an existing individual. On the one hand, aesthetic existence: a mode in which the individual faces no irrevocable decisions, but experiences

[3] Kierkegaard, Either/Or, II, p. 185. "Great as the differences within the aesthetic domain may be, all the stages have this similarity, that the spirit . . . is not determined as spirit but is immediately given."

[4] Despite apparent radical divergences, the standpoints of the speculative philosopher and the aesthete are at bottom the same for Kierkegaard, insofar as both undermine the value of particularity, dissipate the force of all distinctions, and mediate all choices, without ever requiring of the exister any decisive, personal commitment. See Either/Or, II, pp. 170 f.

himself as a transient, kaleidoscopic focus for moods and experiences, an adventurer amid the endless possibilities of life, who savors all, yet judges and commits himself to none:

> For he who lives aesthetically seeks as far as possible to be absorbed in mood, he seeks to hide himself entirely in it, so that there remains nothing in him which cannot be inflected into it; for such a remainder has always a disturbing effect, it is a continuity which would hold him back. The more the personality disappears in the twilight of mood, so much the more is the individual in the moment, and this again is the most adequate expression for the aesthetic existence: it is in the moment.[5]

On the other, the concrete self-choice of ethical existence, where the individual submits the endless string of moments, the vast immediacy of aesthetic life, to the integrating and unifying authority of the subjective will.

Only the interested striving of the ethically inward self, Kierkegaard insists, truthfully preserves the dynamic tension between finite and infinite, time and eternity, which characterizes human existence. Both the aesthetic and ethical individual unavoidably participate in the movement of time; both possess a certain concrete finitude, or "facticity," comprising a personal history, a range of talents and qualities, a specific set of possibilities. But only the ethical individual actively takes up that facticity and, by freely choosing himself in his entire concreteness, succeeds in mastering and integrating his unique personality, through the "infinitizing" power of subjective freedom:

> But what is it to live aesthetically, and what is it to live ethically? . . . To this I would reply: the aesthetical in a man is that by which he is immediately what he is; the ethical is that whereby he becomes what he becomes . . . .[6]

There is nothing, in a sense, so abstract as this free choice of self which Kierkegaard regards as the primordially ethical decision. It is a pure act of self-relation, an "infinite movement"[7] whereby the existing self affirms himself in his entirety but without

[5] Kierkegaard, Either/Or, II, p. 234.

[6] Ibid., p. 182.

[7] Ibid., p. 229.

reference to specific achievements, qualities, or intentions:

> But what is it that I choose? Is it this thing or that? No, for I choose absolutely, and the absoluteness of my choice is expressed precisely by the fact that I have not chosen to choose this or that. I choose the absolute. And what is the absolute? It is myself in my eternal validity. . . . But what then, is this self of mine? . . . It is the most abstract of all things, and yet at the same time it is the most concrete--it is freedom.[8]

Here, Kierkegaard's freely existing subject seems superficially comparable to the Kantian moral self. For both, the ethical is a standpoint which must be affirmed in opposition to merely empirical selfhood. Kant's moral self stands in an a priori relationship to reason, and "misuses his freedom" if he acts heteronomously, and so contradicts the self-legislated universality of the moral imperative. The individual thus has an absolute duty to himself, not as a psychological, finite personality, but to himself in "his eternal validity" as a member of the rationally constituted kingdom of ends. Kierkegaard, too, insists that the ethical individual is absolutely related to himself, through freedom. However, his vision sharply opposes Kant's identification of freedom with a priori reason. Freedom, for Kierkegaard, is the antithesis of necessity, while reason, with its claim to mediate opposites--to view time under the aspect of eternity, as Kierkegaard frequently complains--involves necessary movement, and so is antithetical to the essential "possibility-structure" of existence. Kierkegaard therefore elucidates human freedom in terms of the category of possibility, arguing that existence, with its unavoidable nisus toward self-transcendence, can be lived authentically only if the individual consciously grasps and expresses himself as the temporal actualization of concrete, finite possibilities, rather than as one with the abstract necessity of the moral law. He avows:

> I am not an ethical rigorist, an enthusiast for a formal, abstract freedom. If only the choice [i.e., of the self, as absolute, as one's only ethical task] is posited, then all of the aesthetical returns again . . . .[9]

[8] Kierkegaard, Either/Or, II, p. 218.

[9] Ibid., p. 182. [Emphasis mine.]

Here, the divergence from Kant's view of ethical selfhood becomes clear. For Kant, the dynamic opposition between the heteronomous motives of the individual, and the motive of acting in accordance with one's duty as a rational being, forms the context for ethical life. Thus, the ideal of the moral subject is to reconcile his finite, particular will with universal rational law, and actual ethical existence may be characterized as a ceaseless struggle to achieve this goal. For Kierkegaard, too, ethical existence is a persistent striving, aimed at unifying one's actual and ideal selves through freedom. However, the existing individual's ideal self is not a self whose will acts in conformity with an a priori moral law. Rather, the ethical subject's overriding goal is to intensify and deepen his own finite, concrete individuality through freely assuming and realizing those temporal possibilities which are uniquely his. Kierkegaard's existing subject thus seeks concrete self-unification, unity within temporal becoming, rather than in opposition to it.

The highest interest of the authentic individual is existence itself,[10] and, as we have seen, existence is that mode in which eternity remains an expectation, and in which finite and infinite are essentially opposed. Thus, the ethical subject must repeatedly reenact his initial self-choosing, because its very content is himself qua existing, i.e., as a being in a constant state of becoming. It is only this repeated, concernful reaffirmation of himself, as a finite, temporal concretion, which constitutes the existing subject as genuinely free individuality. The universal in man, his essence, for Kierkegaard, is thus simply the capacity of any and every individual for unique self-integration, for transforming his concrete facticity--his own natural individuality--through freely appropriating and willing it in its entirety:

> When you choose yourself absolutely, you easily discover that this self is not an abstraction or a tautology . . . it is an illusion to suppose that the self is entirely abstract and empty, for it is not conscious simply of freedom in general, as thought might conceive it, but . . . of this definite free being who is himself and no other. This self contains a rich concretion, a manifold

[10] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 279.

> variety of determinants and characteristics, being the whole aesthetical self which is chosen ethically.[11]

The self who thus posits himself absolutely, in freedom, preserves himself as an actually existing individual, while at the same time transmuting this merely immediate, aesthetic individuality into an eternally valid reality:

> He becomes himself, quite the same self as he was before, down to the least significant peculiarity, and yet he becomes another, for the choice permeates everything and transforms it. Thus his finite personality is infinitized by the choice whereby he infinitely chooses himself.[12]

To have "infinitely chosen" oneself is not to affirm one's pure self-identity, so as to elevate abstract self-consciousness above the sphere of temporality and finitude. Kierkegaard attributes this misguided brand of self-choosing to the mystic, who, he says, indeed chooses himself absolutely, but, having taken this initial crucial step, then affirms himself in complete isolation from the temporal world, abstracting himself out of existence, rather than finally entering upon it. Genuine ethical self-choosing, in contrast, is the choice of oneself as becoming, as immersed in the contradictions of finite existence:

> Only when in his choice a man has assumed himself, is clad in himself, has so totally penetrated himself that every movement is attended by the consciousness of a responsibility for himself, only then has he chosen himself ethically . . . only then is he concrete.[13]

The self-choosing of the mystic succeeds only in degrading actual concrete existence:

> The fault of the mystic is that by his choice he does not become concrete for himself . . . he chooses himself abstractly, and therefore lacks transparency. For it is a mistake to think that the abstract is the transparent.[14]

To be genuinely self-transparent is to have absolutely embraced one's finitude, and thus, through freely assuming responsibility for all that one is and will become, to establish an absolute continuity with the temporal order:

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[11] Kierkegaard, Either/Or, II, pp. 226-227. [Emphasis mine.]

[12] Ibid., p. 227. [Emphasis mine.]

[13] Ibid., p. 252. [Emphasis mine.]

[14] Ibid.

> The truly concrete choice is that wherewith at the very same instant I choose myself out of the world I am choosing myself back into the world. For when I choose myself repentantly I gather myself together in all my finite concretion, and in the fact that I have thus chosen myself out of the finite I am in the most absolute continuity with it.[15]

The free positing of oneself does not destroy, therefore, but rather permeates and transforms finite individuality. Instead of leaving behind one's natural selfhood, by choosing oneself only as absolutely other than finitude (as does the mystic, or Kierkegaard argues, the speculative philosopher) the subject who chooses himself ethically chooses himself concretely and assumes responsibility for himself as "this definite individual, with these talents, these dispositions, these instincts . . . this definite product of a definite environment."[16] At the very moment that freedom most completely isolates him from his actual existence, therefore, he is nevertheless in the deepest possible continuity with it.

As with the mystic, so with the selfhood of the aesthetic individual, which, while it appears as an instance of self-choosing, is equally abstract. The aesthetic individual perceives life as a glittering array of possibilities, toward all of which he stands in a relation of externality, or of personal indifference. In contrast, for the ethical individual there is only one possibility--himself, as an infinite task. For such an individual, the free positing of himself is the initial step toward self-integration, such that the multitudinous external possibilities of aesthetic existence may become genuinely his, and hence, no longer merely accidentally determined or determining:

> . . . at the instant of choice [the ethical individual] concludes himself in a unity, and yet at the same time he is at the beginning, for he chooses himself freely . . . transforming all the outwardness into inwardness.[17]
>
> This concretion is the reality of the individual, but as he chooses it in accord with his freedom, one can also say that it is his possibility, or that it is his task . . . his goal, his aim. But the fact that the individual sees

[15] Kierkegaard, Either/Or, II, p. 253.

[16] Ibid., p. 215.

[17] Ibid., p. 256.

> his possibility as his task expresses his sovereignty over himself, which he never relinquishes . . . .[18]

This standpoint of sovereignty over oneself is, quintessentially, the existential standpoint of freedom--a freedom which is a universal possibility for all men, qua subjects, but which is actualizable only in relation to each subject's particular, historically and naturally conditioned possibilities, and is thus entirely concrete:

> . . . while the ethical is, in a certain sense, infinitely abstract, it is in another sense, infinitely concrete, and there is indeed nothing more concrete, because it is subject to a dialectic that is individual to each human being, precisely as this particular human being.[19]

Thus, for Kierkegaard, "the ethical, the task of becoming subjective" is neither a retreat from the demands of thought into the realm of feeling, nor the pursuit of an arbitrary originality, but the most rigorously exacting challenge open to the existing subject. To exist within and through one's temporal facticity is to elevate and redeem human finitude by drawing it into unity with the "eternally valid" inwardness of free subjective spirit:

> It is precisely the beauty of the temporal that in it the infinite Spirit and the finite spirit are separated, and it is precisely the greatness of the finite spirit that the temporal is assigned to it. . . . For man's eternal dignity consists in the fact that he can have a history, the divine element in him consists in the fact that he

[18] Kierkegaard, Either/Or, II, p. 256.

[19] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 138. Kierkegaard draws a crucial distinction between mere aesthetic and intellectual possibility (see Chapter IV, pp. 148-153) to which the exister stands only in an external relation, and ethical possibility, whereby these merely external--hence, ethically-speaking, "unreal" possibilities--become actual: "The aesthetic and intellectual principle is that no reality is thought or understood until its esse has been resolved into its posse. The ethical principle is that no possibility is understood until each posse has really become an esse. An aesthetic and intellectual scrutiny protests every esse which is not a posse; the ethical scrutiny results in the condemnation of every posse which is not an esse, but this refers only to a posse in the individual himself . . . ." (CUP, p. 288). "The real action is not the external act, but an internal decision in which the individual puts an end to the mere possibility and identifies himself with the content of his thought in order to exist in it." (CUP, p. 302).

> himself, if he will, can impart to this history continuity, for this it acquires only when it is not the sum of all that has happened to me or befallen me, but is my own work, in such a way that even what has befallen me is by me transformed and translated from necessity to freedom.[20]

This conception of freedom must, finally, be sharply distinguished from Kant's notion of ethical selfhood as subject to a priori imperatives; but it equally must be dissociated from any view of freedom as mere arbitrary self-assertion. Kierkegaard contrasts the sheer contingency of aesthetic choice with genuine existential freedom, much as Kant poses the dichotomy between the heteronomous and autonomous wills. However, for Kant, the principle of the autonomy of the will represents an a priori condition of the possibility of morality, and is not identifiable with any empirical experience of freedom. Kierkegaard, on the other hand, stresses the importance of the unavoidable, concrete a priori of individual inwardness, of temporal self-experience and willing. Further, he insists that unless the entire content of aesthetic experience--the sheer finite particularity of an individual's history, his contingent facticity--is somehow preserved within the "infinite" standpoint of ethical subjectivity, then ethical selfhood is a mere abstraction. The aesthetical and ethical modes of existence, Kierkegaard argues, mutually support one another: without the infinitizing, integrating authority of the ethical will, aesthetic life lacks principled coherence, and dissipates itself in the despair of finitude and relativity.[21] Without the concreteness of aesthetic experience, however, the choice of self is the choice only of an empty self-identity, and hence no expression for authentically existing, finite subjectivity.

For both Kant and Kierkegaard, ethical life is a continuing struggle. For Kant, ethical activity is the ceaseless effort of the finite, yet rational subject to bring his natural, heteronomously determined will into unity with rational law. For Kierkegaard, ethical striving is a quest for personal self-integration, for "ideal selfhood," defined as the reconciliation of the infinitizing

[20] Kierkegaard, Either/Or, II, pp. 254-255.

[21] Ibid., p. 227.

freedom of the subjective will with the finite facticity of aesthetic experience.[22] Such unification cannot be accomplished once and for all; not because, as in Kant, finite, phenomenally determined personality and rational, noumenal freedom are ultimately incommensurable, but because the individual's concrete, temporal becoming always actually outstrips his activity of self-penetration, so that the integration of one's actuality and one's possibilities remains an essentially ideal task. Nevertheless, the subject's free affirmation and understanding of himself as a concrete unity, his attempt to preserve sovereignty over the entire manifold determinations of personality, renders the ethical self "essential" rather than contingent selfhood: "He who lives ethically abolishes to a certain degree the distinction between the accidental and the essential, for he accepts himself, every inch of himself, as equally essential."[23] Thus, "Everything posited by his freedom belongs to him essentially, however accidental it may seem to be . . . ."[24] The "essentiality" of free, ethical selfhood is, then, not bound up with the a priori necessity of reason, for Kierkegaard. Rather, it is imparted to adventitious, phenomenal experience, by an unmediated, radical choice which establishes and continuously reaffirms a relationship of subjective unity, of inwardness, between the individual's infinitizing will and the order of immediate, contingent experience. For the ethical individual who has himself as his absolute aim, the goal is not to strive to overcome the imperfections associated with finitude, but rather to render his accidental facticity essential through the self-conscious willing of finite personality:

[22] Kierkegaard's conception of the subjective will as the "infinite" dimension of human selfhood echoes Descartes' assessment of the will as an infinite capacity. For Descartes', however, genuine freedom demanded the governance by reason of this abstractly infinite power. For Kierkegaard, it is precisely the infinitude of subjective freedom which constitutes it as an "a priori" governing and unifying principle of human experience, through whose functioning, with respect to the world of natural necessity, genuine selfhood is constituted and maintained.

[23] Kierkegaard, Either/Or, II, p. 265.

[24] Ibid., p. 264.

> The ethical then will not change the individual into another man but make him himself, it will not annihilate the aesthetical but transfigure it. It is essential to a man who is to live ethically that he become so radically conscious of himself that no adventitious trait escape him. This concretion the ethical would not obliterate, but it sees in this its task . . . .[25]

Subjective freedom, then, is neither arbitrary self-assertion nor detached self-contemplation. The absolute aim of the ethical individual is to fully realize himself as existing subjectivity. But this can be achieved only if he fully knows himself, recognizing in his own life the structure of existence as infinite becoming, recognizing himself as an infinitely self-interested individual who is inescapably immersed in finitude.

The Socratic dictum "know thyself" assumes a new significance in the context of this existential notion of ethical selfhood. Thinking, for Kierkegaard, is a valid existential activity, but only insofar as it is pursued as a means of enhancing and deepening one's concrete inwardness, or freedom. In the service of subjective self-realization thought has an essential role; employed as a means of lifting the finite self out of existence, it is subversive:

> He who lives ethically has seen himself, knows himself, penetrates with his consciousness his whole concretion . . . .[26]
>
> . . . to draw the conclusion that an existing individual who really exists does not think at all, is an arbitrary misunderstanding. He certainly thinks, but he thinks everything in relation to himself, being infinitely interested in existing.[27]

The thinking of the ethical individual, who is infinitely interested in existing, takes the form of concernful activity, rather than of disinterested contemplation. Ethical self-realization requires that the individual understand himself <u>within existence</u>, hence as a synthesis of finite and infinite, whose existential reality is the ceaseless struggle for self-integration. But, if the individual is such a struggling self, then knowing, too, is an activity within existential becoming, a repeated choice of self, rather than a

[25] Kierkegaard, <u>Either/Or</u>, II, pp. 257-258.

[26] Ibid., p. 263.

[27] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 281.

detached reflection upon the nature of existence:

> But the ethical is not merely a knowing; it is also a doing that is related to a knowing . . . .[28]

> The ethical individual knows himself, but this knowledge is not a mere contemplation . . . it is a reflection upon himself which is itself an action, and therefore I have deliberately preferred to use the expression "choose oneself" instead of know oneself. So when the individual knows himself, he is not through; on the contrary, this knowledge is in the highest degree fruitful, and from it proceeds the true individual.[29]

Kierkegaard's conception of the relationship between individual ethical freedom and thought must be distinguished from Kant's. For Kant, the finite individual expresses genuine ethical selfhood when he thinks of himself under the concept of rational freedom, and regards himself, essentially, as a member of a transcendent kingdom of ends. For Kierkegaard, such self-understanding remains sterile, the validity of the standpoint of freedom itself uncertain, unless the abstractly infinite freedom of subjectivity can be brought into conscious continuity with the entire aesthetic content of finite existence. It is the subjective willing of temporal continuity which generates that "necessity" which characterizes Kierkegaard's ethical self.

Such necessity is possible, however, only at the level of the individual personality, who must pursue "the universal" through passionate, interested reflection upon, and choice of the conditions and possibilities of his actual temporal existence. The ethical ideal is to render one's concrete facticity--that finitude to which as an existing subject one is already inevitably bound--an essential, as opposed to an accidental expression of unique selfhood. To become a paradigmatic man, whose finitude is transformed through the infinitizing activity of subjective willing, is a universal ethical goal, open to all existing subjects. Each concretely existing subject is thus a universal for himself; his personal self-integration is his sole concern, and the duty to know and choose, thus fully realizing himself as an existing subject, is a duty which arises solely from within: "Only when the individual himself is the

[28] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 143.

[29] Kierkegaard, Either/Or, II, p. 263.

universal is it possible to realize the ethical."[30] For this reason, "Personality manifests itself as the absolute which has its teleology in itself."[31]

For Kant, too, of course, the duty to actualize the "good will" arises from within; ethical autonomy is synonymous with dutiful action in accordance with self-legislated rational imperatives. But such rational, universal self-consciousness, Kierkegaard maintains, cannot be identified with the personality of the actually existing subject. Thought, for the existing individual, can only be interested, passionate reflection upon existence:

> . . . it is impossible to think about existence without passion . . . all existential problems are passionate problems, for when existence is interpenetrated with reflection, it generates passion . . . .[32]

This is so because existence itself involves a tremendous contradiction--the contradiction between the demands of the finite and infinite, time and eternity--which meet and seek satisfaction within subjective existence. For Kant, the clash between finite, individual wills and universal, rational will finds a resolution in the capacity of the ethical subject to think of himself outside existence, as transcendentally free. Further, although within ethical life, the struggle of the finite, rational subject to achieve moral integrity is ceaseless, yet because it is essentially rational, ethical self-consciousness postulates the completion of the moral struggle as rationally necessary. Faith in God, as the "moral Author of the world," and hope for

[30] Kierkegaard, Either/Or, II, p. 260. In Fear and Trembling, Kierkegaard argues that, in faith, the individual becomes higher than the universal--i.e., that the ethical standpoint (the standpoint wherein the "infinitizing" subjectivity of the individual continuously integrates within itself the individual's finite facticity, in its personal, social, and civic aspects) has intrinsic limitations. Nevertheless, it is only through existing as a "paradigmatic man," i.e., an ethical individual, that the self comes finally to recognize its ultimate powerlessness to effect full existential self-realization. Thus, if the individual is to achieve the ethical ideal of "becoming a subject," he must, paradoxically, transcend the ethical struggle, and relate himself, in faith, to the Absolute, to God.

[31] Ibid., p. 267.

[32] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 313.

immortality, as a condition of the rational possibility of ethical perfection, thus are integrated within reason's apprehension of reality, because they are seen as the necessary culmination of the rational quest for ethical self-realization. Thus, an ultimate resolution, within thought, of the contradictions inherent in finite existence, is at least implicit in the ethical experience.

According to Kierkegaard, however, no such resolution is possible. Inescapably enmeshed in temporal becoming, the ethical subject cannot hope, through thought, to identify himself with a transcendent kingdom of ends. The only a priori to which existing individuals have access is the infinitizing inwardness of individual subjectivity itself, which eludes conceptualization, but which is always presupposed in any attempt to either act or think within existence. This being the case, ethical self-realization cannot culminate in the postulation of a perfected rational order, without betraying its primary experience of itself as radical inwardness. Ethical freedom, for Kierkegaard, can only be actualized in the persistent efforts of the subject to realize authentic selfhood within finite temporal existence. This involves resolutely holding together[33] the contradictions of finite and infinite, time and eternity, within the "concrete a priori" of subjective inwardness, rather than seeking to transcend or mediate existence, through the pursuit of an abstractly one-sided rationality: "Existence involves a tremendous contradiction from which the subjective thinker does not have to abstract, though he can if he will, but in which it is his business to remain."[34] Thus,

> The subjective thinker has the task of understanding himself in existence. . . . The subjective thinker is an existing individual and a thinker at one and the same time; he does not abstract from the contradiction . . . but lives in it. . . . In all his thinking, therefore, he has to think the fact that he is an existing individual.[35]

[33] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 268. "A genuine human being, as a synthesis of finite and infinite, finds his reality in holding these two factors together, infinitely interested in existing . . . ."

[34] Ibid., p. 313.

[35] Ibid., p. 314.

If one seeks an answer through reflection alone to that "qualitative disjunction" which characterizes human existence, says Kierkegaard, then precisely those issues which most concern existing individuals will be thrust aside, rather than genuinely confronted and resolved. For example, in Kant's philosophy, the question of human immortality is approached reflectively, through a consideration of the rational conditions of the possibility of a perfected morality. As a result, faith in an "eternal happiness" is viewed as a reasonable expectation, since it is grounded in the rationality of ethical selfhood. For Kierkegaard, however, such a reasonable faith is no faith at all, because it does not truly address those problems which passionately concern the existing subject:

> The questionable character of abstract thought becomes apparent especially in connection with all existential problems, where abstract thought gets rid of the difficulty by leaving it out. . . . It explains immortality in general, and all goes quite smoothly, in that immortality is identified with eternity, with the eternity which is essentially the medium of all thought. But whether an existing individual human being is immortal, which is the difficulty, abstract thought does not trouble to inquire . . . an abstract thinker who neglects to take into account the relationship between his abstract thought and his own existence as an individual makes a comical impression upon the mind . . . .[36]

Thus, in sharp opposition to "Kant's misleading reflection which brings reality into connection with thought," Kierkegaard asserts that reality must be "relegated to the ethical,"[37] if that skepticism implicit in philosophical idealism is to be transcended. The "only reality to which the existing individual sustains a real relationship" is his own reality, i.e., his concrete selfhood, as consciously appropriated and willed through the infinitizing activity of subjective spirit. The task of becoming a self engages the whole personality, will, imagination, reflection; through passionate, free resolution, the ethically existing individual holds together those rationally irreconcilable contradictions which beset, and yet define, existence. His infinite interest in existing is the synthesizing

[36] Kierkegaard, CUP, pp. 267-268. See also ibid., pp. 152-158 and p. 180.

[37] Ibid., p. 294.

power which transforms the contingencies of finite becoming into a unified totality, into a necessity, as Kierkegaard says. And yet, this same ethical self-interest alone stands as an irreducible "reality," the only reality which is not susceptible to conceptualization, and hence, for Kierkegaard, the locus for the only genuine certainty accessible to existing individuals.

Kierkegaard's discussion of the importance of "concreteness" for genuine ethical selfhood sheds light upon his claim that "the ethical alone is certain." Earlier, the suspicion was raised that the "inwardness of spirit" which Kierkegaard identifies with authentic ethical selfhood is, in some ways, even more abstract, more empty of content, than those idealist views of selfhood he so vigorously opposes.[38] It seems clear, now, however, that Kierkegaard's notion of ethical inwardness is at least not intended to exalt a merely abstract self-certainty, based either upon pure self-contemplation, or upon formally infinite self-willing. Indeed, ethical existence is portrayed as the only mode of truly concrete spirituality open to man, because it is the only mode wherein the radical disjunction of finite and infinite which characterizes human self-experience can be "held together" through the free resolution of the subject.

The concreteness Kierkegaard ascribes to ethical selfhood has two related aspects. Firstly, the ethical subject's choice of himself is concrete, in the sense that the content of his ethical activity is himself, as a "task which is manifoldly defined."[39] His project is thus not to will himself, once and for all, as pure self-identity, but rather, in detail to affirm and possess himself "as he is determined in his whole concretion."[40] His goal is to "order, cultivate, temper, enkindle, repress, in short, to bring about a proportionality in the soul, a harmony . . . ."[41] Such a task of self-mastery, Kierkegaard points out, is more than adequately rich and concrete, and abolishes the common criticism that an ethical life is a life based on abstract, merely prohibitive laws, rather

[38] See above, Chapter IV, pp. 160-167.

[39] Kierkegaard, Either/Or, II, p. 262.

[40] Ibid., p. 266.

[41] Ibid., p. 267.

than a full expression of individual personality:

> This concretion the ethical would not obliterate but sees in this its task. . . . Commonly, one regards the ethical quite abstractly and therefore has a secret horror of it. The ethical is thus regarded as something foreign to the personality . . . .[42]

But, for Kierkegaard, the bringing to full actualization of the personality is the highest task of the ethical, a task which has its origins not outside the individual, in some externally imposed notion of duty, but arises from within the personality itself.[43]

Indeed, to adopt an attitude of disinterested reflection as a means of developing the ethical is, for Kierkegaard, to undermine its essential significance, its rootedness in the concreteness of individual subjectivity. To "contemplate the ethical," to try, for instance, to bring one's ethical inwardness into unity with "humanity and the world," is actually to abandon the ethical standpoint, by imposing an illusory rational continuity upon the radically individual unity of ethical selfhood:

> The ethical lays hold of each individual and demands that he refrain from all contemplation, especially of humanity and the world; for the ethical, as being the internal, cannot be observed by an outsider. It can be realized only by the individual subject, who alone can know what it is that moves him.[44]
>
> This is profitable preliminary training for an ethical mode of existence; to learn that the individual stands alone.[45]

The isolation of the ethical individual is not however solipsistic, Kierkegaard argues, for through the initial movement, wherein the individual "chooses himself out of the world," the authentic individual thereby also "chooses himself back into the world,"[46] and exists henceforward in the deepest possible continuity with it.

Because its content is this repeated choice of self, in its concrete, finite facticity, ethical existence is for Kierkegaard

[42] Kierkegaard, Either/Or, II, p. 258.

[43] Ibid., p. 261.

[44] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 284.

[45] Ibid., p. 289; see also p. 127.

[46] Kierkegaard, Either/Or, p. 253.

concrete in the second, broader sense that, through it alone the ontological dualities of human existence may be reconciled. This is so because the free resolution of ethical activity holds together, on the one hand, the moment of the infinite, self-relational capacity of subjectivity, and finite, concrete personality, on the other. The infinitizing action of free subjectivity leaves no insignificant detail of the individual's facticity outside the scope of its free self-choosing:

> Therefore, the deeper down you go into yourself, the more you will feel the significance of every insignificance (not in a finite but in an infinite sense) because it is posited by you, and when a man thus chooses himself in an ethical sense this does not mean merely a reflection about himself. . . . For when the passion of freedom is aroused, the self is jealous of itself and will by no means allow it to remain undetermined what belongs to it and what does not. Hence, in the first instance of choice the personality issues forth apparently as naked as does a child from the body of its mother; the next instant it is concrete in itself and only by an arbitrary abstraction can it come to pass that a man is able to remain at this point. He becomes himself, quite the same self he was before, down to the least significant peculiarity, and yet he becomes another, for the choice permeates everything and transforms it. Thus his finite personality is infinitized by the choice whereby he infinitely chooses himself.[47]

The merely natural content of finite personality is thus "spiritualized," the authentically ethical individual being effectively "born again" through the power of free subjectivity.

But the concreteness of finite facticity is not simply absorbed and annulled through the infinitizing agency of free subjectivity, as indeed it is, Kierkegaard maintains, when thought, rather than resolute self-choosing, takes hold of the manifoldness of concrete existence:

> In thinking, I infinitize myself, too, but not absolutely, for I disappear in the absolute.[48]

For Kierkegaard, the only way the individual subject can avoid succumbing to the illusion that he is, essentially, an element within a higher Absolute, is if he recognizes and consciously wills himself

[47] Kierkegaard, Either/Or, II, p. 227.

[48] Ibid., p. 228.

as an unsurpassable absolute. The problem with the infinitizing power of thought is that it attempts to reduce the concretely existing subject to a shadow of his true self, a mere moment within the overarching necessity of Absolute Reality, understood as a rationally-comprehensible whole. But concrete, ethical becoming contains its own necessity, says Kierkegaard, a necessity which is in principle prior to the abstract systematizing of thought.

Kierkegaard's difficulty, then, is not with the concepts of an "absolute," or of an "infinitizing subjectivity" as such. He accepts these profoundly idealistic categories, but seeks to interpret them in an entirely new key. His concern is that the self's infinitizing capacity not be employed abstractly, since, he argues, the identification of the self with pure thought neutralizes rather than enhances the concrete individuality and autonomy of the existing subject:

> Only when I absolutely choose myself do I infinitize myself absolutely, for I myself am the absolute, for only myself can I choose absolutely, and this absolute choice of myself is freedom . . . .[49]

For Kierkegaard, the only way to actualize and preserve concrete autonomy for the finite subject is to affirm finite individuality itself as absolute, thus, in effect, reversing the procedure of pure thinking (which would, paradoxically, "absolutize" the individual by abstracting from his irreducible particularity and so in actuality leave genuine individuality out of account):

> If personality is the absolute, then it is itself the Archimedean point from which one can lift the world. That this consciousness cannot mislead the individual to want to cast reality from him you can readily see, for if he would be the absolute in this sense, he is nothing at all, an abstraction. Only as the particular is he the absolute . . . .[50]

For Kierkegaard, the only absolute to which existing subjectivity has access is itself. In choice, I "infinitize" myself, lifting myself above the sheer immediacy of finite, natural existence, while at the same time my resolute act of freedom renders the entirety of my contingent, empirical personality and history

[49] Kierkegaard, Either/Or, II, p. 228.

[50] Ibid., p. 270.

essential, or necessary. Precisely through freely affirming myself in my singularity, as a particular historically conditioned individual, says Kierkegaard, I transcend mere temporality, the sheer external blind necessity of finite becoming, while equally losing nothing of the concreteness of finitude. Indeed, if the self is to become an actually free subject, it requires the "otherness" of finite differences, without which its infinite strivings would be only empty self-assertion. Through the sovereign choice of myself as finite, as a product, I "produce myself as a freely existing subject,"[51] the only genuinely concrete synthesis of finite and infinite, time and eternity, which is possible for existing humanity.

[51] Kierkegaard, Either/Or, II, pp. 255-256.

Chapter Six

The Absoluteness of Finite Personality

1. Absolute and Relative Forms of Inwardness Distinguished

We have seen that Kierkegaard's complex variations on the theme of finite subjectivity grow out of two fundamental, interrelated insights. Firstly, there is his contention that authentic human subjectivity can only be located in the sphere of the ethical; but equally crucial is his claim that the full realization of ethical selfhood requires of the existing subject a passionate faith in God, and more specifically, in the God-man, Jesus Christ.[1]

For Kierkegaard, the ethically-existing individual, alone, is proof against that debilitating self-alienation of the human spirit which so disfigures the modern age. Indeed, Kierkegaard holds that the finite human personality, in the irreducible reality of its inwardness, is the sole power which can resist both the illusions of metaphysics and the skeptical implications of historical, merely empirical understanding:

> Precisely when one perceives that personality is the absolute, is its own end and purpose, is the unity of the universal and the particular, precisely then will all scepticism which takes the historical as its point of departure be effectively overcome.[2]

To the ethically-existing individual, whose free "infinitizing" subjectivity unifies the endless particularities of natural, finite

[1] Once the full significance of Kierkegaard's insistence upon the existential primacy of ethical selfhood has been made explicit, the importance of this second major element in Kierkegaard's thought will become apparent, and will therefore constitute the central topic for the final chapters of this study.

[2] Kierkegaard, Either/Or, II, p. 269.

becoming, Kierkegaard opposes the false infinity of historicizing reflection:

> The freethinker perceives very clearly that the easiest way to volatize the ethical is by opening the door to the historical infinity. And yet there is something true in his position, for in the last resort, if the individual is not himself the absolute, empiricism is the only road open to him. . . . If finiteness is my lot, it is arbitrary to come to a stop at any particular point.[3]

Such freethinkers may present themselves as the guardians of true human spirituality, but in actuality, says Kierkegaard, their "infinitizing reflections" draw them ever further from the concrete infinity which is authentic ethical existence; for "Only as the particular is he the absolute, and this consciousness will save him from all revolutionary radicalism."[4]

Although Kierkegaard is frequently interpreted as the proponent of an extreme form of subjectivism--an interpretation which gains considerable credibility in the light of such claims regarding the absoluteness of individual personality--nevertheless his explicit intention, in thus absolutizing the finite subject, is to counteract the rising forces of "revolutionary radicalism" which threaten to sweep away all inwardness, in the name of false forms of absolute wisdom. Through focusing upon the concrete existence of the individual whose infinite ethical striving transforms the arbitrary facticity of finite, natural experience into an integrated spiritual whole, Kierkegaard hopes to prevent that shearing apart of subjectivity and objectivity which he condemns as the inevitable result of the modern age's allegiance to the twin idols of speculative thought and empirical reflection.

In contrast to Descartes and Kant, for whom the autonomy of the individual will is essentially bound up with the universality of reason, Kierkegaard's existential ethic entrenches the particular

[3] Kierkegaard, Either/Or, II, p. 270.

[4] Ibid.

will of the existing individual at its center.[5] This is not to say that, any more than Kant, Kierkegaard reveres the wayward intentions of the heteronomous will. On the contrary, his analysis of the relation between aesthetic and ethical existence, as we have just seen, draws a sharp distinction between the abstract, therefore illusory, freedom of the aesthetic personality and the concrete autonomy of the ethically inward individual.

Yet there is evidently a problem here. Kierkegaard's disclaimers notwithstanding, the status of ethical inwardness as the foundational category of existence remains insecure, unless he can sustain its "absoluteness" without falling prey to charges of fostering subjectivism or fanaticism as valid ethical modalities. When he presents the particular, finite individual as the absolute, he assuredly does not intend by this defiantly to exalt the arbitrary or the accidental at the expense of the universal. On the contrary, individual subjectivity represents for him the sole context wherein the universal claim of the ethical can be discovered, appropriated, and authentically lived: "Only when the individual himself is the universal is it possible to realize the ethical."[6] The central requirement of the

[5] For an enlightening discussion of the principle of autonomy, as it shapes Kant's and Kierkegaard's analyses of the ethical self, see Jeremy D. B. Walker, To Will One Thing (Montreal and London: McGill and Queen's University Press, 1972). Walker argues that both Kant and Kierkegaard regard the principle of the autonomy of the self as the fundamental principle of morality. Yet, for Kant, autonomy cannot be separated from the universality of rational law, while Walker (concurring here with George Stack, in Kierkegaard's Existentialist Ethics) shows that the central goal for Kierkegaard's ethical subject is "the task of becoming subjective," i.e., the full realization of the autonomy of the individual subject, as opposed to Kant's demand that genuine selfhood can only be achieved through conformity of the individual will with rational, universal law. However, Walker disagrees with Stack in arguing that the very nature of radical ethical commitment--as outlined in Kierkegaard's Purity of Heart Is To Will One Thing--ultimately leads the individual beyond a strictly humanistic standpoint toward the affirmation of faith in the God-man as the sole possible terminus for the self-realization of the ethical will. While I concur with Walker's analysis to the extent of agreeing that the fulfillment of ethical selfhood leads the exister beyond the strictly ethical to a religious standpoint, it seems to me a matter for serious debate whether this move to a standpoint of faith generates the profound enlargement and revision of Kierkegaardian humanism which Walker suggests. This issue will be considered in subsequent chapters of this study.

[6] Kierkegaard, Either/Or, II, p. 260.

ethical--to become a subject--exerts an unconditional authority upon us only because it is the deepest expression of our very humanness itself, rather than an imperative imposed upon us from without:

> So he who lives ethically has himself as his task. His self in its immediacy is accidentally determined, and the task is to work up together the accidental and the universal. So the ethical individual has duty not outside him but in him . . . personality has not the ethical outside it but in it, and out of this depth it breaks forth.[7]

To "work up together the accidental and the universal"--at least as it is articulated by "Judge Wilhelm" in Either/Or--seems to require of the existing individual no essential reference beyond the sphere of concrete human endeavor. Man, on the one hand, is an aesthetic creature, preoccupied with the vicissitudes of his particular experience, with his "possibilities,"[8] to the exclusion of any transcendent concern. On the other hand, he possesses the "infinitizing capacity" of subjective freedom, the power to integrate the incoherent fragments of temporal experience through the unifying authority of his individual will:

> He who chooses himself ethically has himself as his task, and not as a possibility merely, not as a toy to be played with arbitrarily. He can choose himself ethically only when he chooses himself in continuity . . . as a task which is manifoldly defined.[9]

The accidental, immediate self, thus assimilated, constitutes an ever-changing context for the development of the individual's freedom, a freedom which transforms but yet never nullifies the finite content of aesthetic selfhood. Indeed, the manifold particularities of immediate personality are the matter without which ethical freedom deteriorates into a vain and empty formalism, and ethical life becomes the frustrated pursuit of illusory transcendent ideals or empty universals.

Kierkegaard wishes to steer clear both of Kant's ethical formalism and of the abstract universality he regards as characteristic of

[7] Kierkegaard, Either/Or, II, pp. 260-261.

[8] Ibid., p. 256. " . . . he who lives aesthetically sees only possibilities everywhere . . . ."

[9] Ibid., p. 262.

"world-historical" (i.e., speculative, Hegelian) thought, in favor of a way of life true to the requirements and genuine possibilities of individual self-existence. But despite this insistence upon the absoluteness of finite personality, he also wants to avoid confusing authentic inwardness with the arbitrary enthusiasms of the "sincere" individual, who may with equal fervor exist as a criminal, a fanatic, or a saint. The capacity to earnestly "will one thing" is an insufficient criterion, Kierkegaard claims, by which to ascertain the authenticity of the individual's ethical commitment. Such single-minded dedication usually masks an incongruity between the individual's supposedly "absolute" ethical will and the object of that will, which is finite, relative, and therefore an inadequate content for genuine ethical enthusiasm. One of Kierkegaard's recurrent comic figures, the world-historical individual, for instance, is often engrossed by just such pseudo-ethical projects, since he habitually confuses a wholehearted subservience to the "great and significant" aspects of human affairs and history with an authentic pursuit of goodness and truth:

> . . . Ethics looks upon all world-historical knowledge with a degree of suspicion, because it may so easily become a snare, a demoralizing aesthetic diversion for the knowing subject. . . . Demoralized by too assiduous an absorption in world-historical considerations, people no longer have any will for anything except what is world-historically significant, no concern for anything but the accidental . . . instead of concerning themselves solely with the essential, the inner spirit, the ethical, freedom.[10]

The "spiritlessness"[11] of the modern age is a condition which follows from the individual's misguided and futile longing for objective, systematic, and (in the case of the later idealists) absolute knowledge in all spheres, including science, ethics, metaphysics, and religion. This idolatry towards the objective is

[10] Kierkegaard, CUP, pp. 120-121.

[11] This category is used by both Hegel (das Geistlosigkeit) and Kierkegaard, to characterize the fragmented, self-alienated condition of nineteenth-century culture. Mark Taylor, Journies to Selfhood (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 23-69, explores in considerable depth both Hegel's and Kierkegaard's analyses of the causes and the remedy for this spiritual malaise, and delineates vividly the radical contrast in their assessments of the central role of the existing individual in correcting this condition.

parallelled by a corresponding forgetfulness of the self, and of the "absolute" role the single individual's interested existential inwardness must play in all human undertakings. We have succumbed to a kind of hubris, which forbids us to value the subjective possibilities of finite, temporal becoming, but rather teaches that genuine selfhood awaits those who transcend "mere individuality" in the name of the impersonal, eternal wisdom and security of the System. Such security is an illusion, however, since its price is the loss of personal inwardness--of that very self in whose subjective interest the stability and eternal unity of systematic knowledge is pursued.

Kierkegaard is an eloquent champion of subjective spirit--of the realm of the single individual who integrates the objective and subjective dimensions of experience through the "infinitizing" authority of his freedom. His hope is to eliminate both the abstract objectivism of empirical and metaphysical thinking and the equally arbitrary, subjective enthusiasms of merely aesthetic modes of existence. His central ambition is to dispel the levelling, vacant "spiritlessness" of modern existence through focusing upon the eternal validity of concrete ethical subjectivity.[12]

In sharp contrast to the way of ethical inwardness,

> . . . the objective way deems itself to have a security which the subjective way does not . . . it thinks to escape a danger which threatens the subjective way, and this danger is at its maximum: madness. In a merely subjective determination of the truth, madness and truth become in the last analysis indistinguishable, since they may both have inwardness. Nevertheless . . . the absence of inwardness is also madness.[13]

Kierkegaard here carefully dissociates himself both from the "madness" of objective thinking's lack of inwardness and from the arbitrary inwardness of a subjectivism conceived in simple opposition to some objectively determinable finite content. He distinguishes the passionate inwardness of the ethical subject from that of the madman, who, he claims, lacks an adequate content for his supposedly infinite

[12] "And what is the absolute? It is myself in my eternal validity." Kierkegaard, Either/Or, II, p. 219. "I can never become ethically conscious without becoming conscious of my eternal nature." Ibid., p. 274.

[13] Kierkegaard, CUP, pp. 173-174.

subjective willing:

> . . . madness never has that specific inwardness of the infinite. Its fixed idea is precisely some sort of objectivity, and the contradiction of madness consists of embracing this with passion. The critical point in such madness is thus again not the subjective, but the little finitude which has become a fixed idea, which is something that can never happen to the infinite.[14]

When one tries to establish an infinitely passionate relationship to that which is essentially finite, then the fruit of such an enterprise can only be the distortion of authentic inwardness, the misuse of subjective freedom, fanaticism:

> It is a self-contradiction, and therefore comical, to be infinitely interested in that which in its maximum, still always remains an approximation. If in spite of this, passion is nevertheless imported, we get fanaticism.[15]

Ethical existence, for Kierkegaard, then, can be characterized as neither a quest for a Kantian transcendental good, nor for absolute wisdom, nor for the relative achievements of the sincere fanatic. The truth of ethical existence inheres solely in the potential for the particular individual to become the universal, the "paradigmatic" man, through fully appropriating and assuming responsibility for the manifold finitude which is uniquely his. The ethical subject who, in freedom, "chooses himself absolutely," constitutes himself as an existential unity of the accidental and the universal, of immediacy and ideality.[16] The immediate and the ideal, then, are twin aspects of the existing individual's personality. Ethical life, therefore, must be regarded as the attempt of freely self-relational finite spirit to discover within his own individual temporal becoming "that specific inwardness of the infinite" which will authenticate his ethical activity, and preserve him from charges of mere arbitrary self-enhancement.

Ethical existence is characterized by self-transcending activity. The direction of this ceaseless becoming is not determined by some Kantian-style limiting principle, but rather by the immanent ideal

[14] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 174, footnote. [Emphasis mine.]

[15] Ibid., p. 32.

[16] See Kierkegaard, Either/Or, II, pp. 263-264.

of a fully actualized existential inwardness. In opposition to transcendental idealism, Kierkegaard argues that "Personality manifests itself as the absolute which has its teleology in itself."[17] There is, then, only one content which is commensurable with the form of ethical willing, only one "object" of ethical choice which escapes charges of being abstract, arbitrary, or accidental, and "has that specific inwardness of the infinite" which uniquely qualifies it as the end of authentic ethical existence:

> But what is it that I choose? Is it this thing or that? No, for I choose absolutely, and the absoluteness of my choice is expressed precisely by the fact that I have not chosen this or that. I choose the absolute. But what is the absolute? It is myself in my eternal validity. . . . But what, then, is this self of mine? . . . It is the most abstract of all things, and yet at the same time it is the most concrete . . . it is freedom.[18]

The object of ethical choice is the self--but the self as ethically-existing, as free--the concrete synthesis, within time, of finite and infinite, of particular and universal, whose ethical imperative is implied in the ontological structure of being-human itself. The ethical ideal springs forth from man's essential nature as existing subjective spirit--his nature as a being who is essentially dualistic, both finite and infinite, both temporal and eternal, both immediate and ideal. We are existing spirit, whose implicit goal can therefore only be continuously to articulate and to draw into existential unity these divergent moments of our ontological reality:

> . . . a genuine human being, as a synthesis of the finite and the infinite, finds his reality in holding these two factors together, infinitely interested in existing . . . .[19]

> But what is existence? Existence is the child that is born of the infinite and the finite, the eternal and the temporal, and is therefore a constant striving.[20]

[17] Kierkegaard, Either/Or, II, p. 267.

[18] Ibid., p. 218.

[19] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 268. [Emphasis mine.]

[20] Ibid., p. 85.

From Kierkegaard's viewpoint, therefore, there is no trace of the arbitrary, or of the fanatic, in his assertion that "personality is the absolute," because, by "personality," he means only that synthesis of the polar dimensions of human subjectivity, which is the common goal of both existentialism and of its idealist adversaries. His originality arises from the claim that this synthesis (long and fruitlessly sought by idealist thinkers, for whom the finitude of human personality really constituted merely an obstacle to be explained away), lies uniquely within the power of each ethically-existing individual to accomplish. The single individual, who fully apprehends and freely chooses himself, as free subjectivity, can bring about that radical concurrence of finite and infinite which fulfills the ethical "ought" of human existence. Through his fundamental, originary choice of himself as absolute, the subject sets forth upon the path of ethical self-realization; it is in the context of this primary, yet ever-renewed self-affirmation that all finite doing and knowing is illuminated and valued. Existing in and through the "passion of freedom,"[21] the finite spirit comes into possession of himself in his full reality--i.e., as concrete subjectivity which freely unites the finite particularities of temporal becoming and the infinitizing vitality of subjective inwardness.

Through two related arguments, then, Kierekgaard defends his assertion that finite personality is absolute. When he presents the individual as absolute, he means by this that the demand of the ethical, the demand fully to become a subject, is absolute, is the highest purpose that can animate any existing self. This is so, he argues, because, ontologically, man exists in irreconcilable self-diremption--as dualistic, self-alienated subjective spirit. He is a potential synthesis of finite and infinite, of the arbitrary and the essential, of the immediate and the ideal--and so is implicitly driven by an inner imperative toward self-unification. Kierkegaard insists, however, that this ethical ideal can never be achieved through the necessary working of dialectical reason; rather, it must be accomplished, if at all, through the free resolution of

[21] Kierkegaard, Either/Or, II, p. 227.

the existing individual. Thus, the absolute claim of the ethical, i.e., the demand to actualize the fullness of subjectivity, is solely the prerogative of each finite, existing subject himself freely to realize. In this second sense, too, then, individual personality, for Kierkegaard, justifiably may be seen as absolute.

2. The Asymmetrical Structure of Ethical Selfhood

In light of this account of Kierkegaard's view of finite subjectivity as absolute, it would appear that the ethical ideal of "becoming a subject" arises and can be pursued entirely within the framework of the human order, without any essential reference to a transcendent reality. Kierkegaard's emphasis upon the centrality of subjective freedom, as both the starting-point and the goal of ethical existence, certainly supports this interpretation.[22]

We have seen that the fully individuated, concrete subject is a self-generated synthesis, constantly renewed, of finite facticity and infinite subjective willing--an existential reality whose self-imposed integrity Kierkegaard characterizes as essential, rather than accidental in form. This essential self-unity, however, does not come about necessarily. Subjective freedom, not universally functioning dialectical reason, is the chief differentia of the ethical subject. The exercise of freedom--of the individual's "infinitizing" choice of himself--alone constitutes his contingent, finite personality as necessary, an "essential" unity. When the ethical self "infinitely chooses" himself, he is no longer an aesthetical, immediately existing being, whose individual development follows patterns of natural necessity merely, but a personality now essentially unified through freedom:

[22] See Stack, Kierkegaard's Existentialist Ethics, who argues that Kierkegaard's "ethics of self-becoming," while compatible with a religious orientation, is perfectly coherent without reference to the Divine Other. Kierkegaard himself does say that " . . . it is possible to exist with inwardness outside Christianity" (CUP, p. 248); however, I shall argue that the "leap of faith" is essential to realizing the ethical ideal of achieving a fully concrete subjective inwardness.

> . . . the ethical life view . . . builds life upon what essentially belongs to being. The aesthetical . . . is that in a man whereby he immediately is the man he is; the ethical is that whereby he becomes what he becomes. By this, I do not intend to say that the man who lives aesthetically does not develop, but he develops by necessity, not by freedom, no metamorphosis takes place in him, no infinite movement whereby he reaches the point from whence he becomes what he becomes.[23]

Thus, while the ethical imperative to become a fully concrete subject is itself a necessary consequence of man's structure as a duality of immediacy and ideality, yet concrete ethical selfhood remains a contingent matter, dependent upon the will of each individual subject for its realization. The "infinite movement" of freedom renders the finite, accidental self a necessary unity--but no such "infinitizing choice" follows necessarily from the nature of the existing subject. That synthesis of finite and infinite which is the fulfillment of human existence, for Kierkegaard, is always an essential possibility, but never a necessity for the individual. Man is, essentially, a duality, which Kierkegaard insists no rational activity can mediate. "Mediation is a mirage, like the I-am-I."[24] The polar tensions in human nature are irreducible, except that the free action of spirit can strive repeatedly to unify the divided self, within existence, in moments of passionate inwardness:

> It is only momentarily that the particular is able to realize existentially a unity of the infinite and the finite which transcends existence. The unity is realized in the moment of passion.[25]

Self-realization, through freedom, is then the unassailable starting-point and terminus for the existing finite subject. The content of one's concrete selfhood, the particular objects of the subjective will, have no intrinsic essentiality, but acquire their significance only through being chosen by the infinitizing power of

[23] Kierkegaard, Either/Or, II, p. 229.

[24] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 177.

[25] Ibid., p. 176.

the ethical will:

> The ethical individual . . . distinguishes between the essential and the accidental. Everything posited by his freedom belongs to him essentially, however accidental it may seem to be; everything else is for him accidental, however essential it may seem to be . . . only that belongs to me essentially which I ethically accept as my task. If I refuse to accept it, then what essentially belongs to me is that I have refused it.[26]

Thus, from the ethical perspective, all finite interests and aims, comprising the social, economic, political, and personal dimensions of immediate existence, exercise no intrinsic claim upon the individual. They acquire "essential significance" through being accepted or refused by the ethical will.

Kierkegaard purports to have established that the "infinitizing freedom" of the ethical self, and the multitude of contingent, relative concerns of aesthetic existence together form a concrete existential unity of finite and infinite, such that each side of the duality supports and completes its counterpart.[27] Yet it appears from the preceding citation that the individual subject exerts an absolute authority, as "editor"[28] and adjudicator, with respect to an ethically neutral field of finite alternatives. The concrete unity Kierkegaard sees as emerging between the existing subject and the pregiven world is hence asymmetrical: the particular content of the synthesis is a function of each individual's freedom, while no intrinsic, independent claim upon the ethical subject's will attaches to any aspect of the finite order.

Although Kierkegaard asserts that the self which the ethical individual struggles to become " . . . is not an abstract self which fits everywhere and hence nowhere, but a concrete self which stands in reciprocal relations with these surroundings, these conditions of life, this natural order,"[29] any reciprocity between the ethically free subject and the finite context in which his freedom is realized

[26] Kierkegaard, Either/Or, II, p. 264.

[27] See above, Chapter V.

[28] Kierkegaard, Either/Or, p. 264.

[29] Ibid., p. 267.

is the fruit of subjective choosing. The social, the civic, cannot be said of themselves to make equal and independent demands upon the will of the ethical individual, since their claims remain merely immediate, or external, unless freely sanctioned by the subject:

> The individual has his teleology in himself, has inner teleology, is himself his teleology. His self is thus the goal toward which he strives. This self of his, however, is not an abstraction but is absolutely concrete. . . . His self must be opened in due relation to his entire concretion. . . . So his movement, then, is from himself through the world to himself. Here the movement is a real movement, for it is a work of freedom, but at the same time it is immanent teleology . . . .[30]

Clearly, although Kierkegaard intends to preserve the finite, relative world as the very core of concrete human subjectivity, yet the starting-point and goal of subjective becoming remains the radical freedom of the self, to such an extent that the individual's historical, natural, civic, or social context first becomes significant through being freely chosen as his.

All realities other than the individual's own subjective, ethical reality--to which alone he is related in a direct fashion--confront him in the mode of possibility.[31] Because the ethical subject is essentially free, no finite aspect of the external world bears directly or necessarily upon what he himself essentially is. Rather, they exist for him as alternatives which he may either contemplate from an intellectual/aesthetic standpoint, or assimilate into his existential subjective unity as opportunities for self-becoming, or even as imperatives to which he dutifully submits. What is existentially significant (i.e., that in the external, "objective" world toward which the ethically existing self orients himself in respect and responsibility), can only be that which, as a free subject, he himself chooses and determines as an appropriate context for realizing his freedom.

The existential subject, then, is neither ontologically determined nor ethically obligated by any independently grounded set of

[30] Kierkegaard, Either/Or, II, p. 275.

[31] Kierkegaard, CUP, pp. 280-285.

finite circumstances or by any a priori moral law. Although Kierkegaard argues strenuously that the authentic individual--unlike Descartes' cogito or Kant's transcendentally free self--is indeed a concrete subject, a genuine synthesis of finite and infinite, yet this unity is itself an ever-renewed product of the ethical subject's freedom. The existential enactment of the synthesis hence presupposes, indeed necessitates, that the individual subject first discover and sustain himself at a standpoint radically separate from the finite order with which he strives to effect a concrete unity:

> By refraining from raising the question of reality from an aesthetic or intellectual point of view, but asking this question only ethically, and here again only in the interests of one's own reality, each individual will be isolated and compelled to exist for himself . . . this is profitable preliminary training for an ethical mode of existence: to learn that the individual stands alone.[32]

This radical distinction between the individual, as subjective spirit, and the finite world is for Kierkegaard the ontological foundation of the ethical self's unique role as one who freely synthesizes finite and infinite within existence. Yet such extreme dualism presents problems. While the ethical self's ontological isolation is a sine qua non for the exercise of existential freedom--for the subject's resolute commitment to the risk of engaging himself with the world--yet it must equally be the case that the free subject's capacity to generate an existential synthesis from among the diversity of finite circumstances requires that he stand in a peculiarly potent relationship to this order of otherness. From the ethical perspective, indeed, the pregiven relativities of life exhibit only the quasi-independence of an order of possibilities for the ethical subject. It is the ethical individual, therefore, who alone possesses independent reality, and who confers concrete significance upon the innumerable "conceptual possibilities" which

[32] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 287. See also Kierkegaard, Either/Or, II, p. 244. "The first form which the choice [of self] takes is complete isolation. For in choosing myself I detach myself from the whole world till by this detachment I end in abstract identity. The individual having chosen himself in terms of his freedom is eo ipso active. His action, however, has no relation to any surrounding world, for the individual has reduced this to naught and exists only for himself."

comprise the non-subjective pole of experience.

Kierkegaard is most insistent that "The only reality that exists for an existing individual is his own ethical reality";[33] and since it is only as existing individuals (and not as objective thinkers) that we can authentically approach questions about reality at all anyway,[34] then we must conclude that the natural and historical "realities" which the existing subject encounters in the course of his pursuit of self-realization have no independent, objective authority to limit or prescribe the direction of the subjective will. But if, from within the ethical standpoint itself, the given world is not also accessible as intrinsically significant, real and concrete, then questions arise as to the possible grounds the existing subject can evince to support his personal affirmation of some particular set of finite "possibilities." Are not all dimensions of finitude--the historical, social, civic, personal--merely finite (i.e., equally valid, or invalid, equally lacking in concreteness) until chosen, and hence rendered essential by the free subject's infinitizing, absolute choice of himself? And, if this is so, then how can one claim that the self so constituted now manifests a concrete unity with an actually real, though finite world, and not simply subjective authority over an array of conceptual possibilities?

To sustain the absoluteness, the essential reality of the free ethical subject, Kierkegaard must affirm the irreducible independence of the individual, by separating him completely from the realm of "positivity," i.e., from the natural, historical, and social orders, and characterizing him as "the negativity that pervades existence."[35] But further, he must also accord him an "infinitizing" capacity to transform the relativities of the merely positive world in which he arbitrarily discovers himself into the essential material for an

[33] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 280; see also p. 291.

[34] "That the knowing spirit is an existing individual spirit, and that every human being is such an entity existing for himself is a truth I cannot too often repeat. . . . Let no one misunderstand me. I happen to be a poor existing spirit like all other men . . . ." Ibid., p. 169.

[35] Ibid., p. 75.

absolutely concrete selfhood, a synthesis of finite and infinite within existence. Yet such absolute self-choosing, far from representing the concrete unity of two such radically opposed dualities as Kierkegaard proclaims the free subject and the finite world to be, represents rather the primacy of an abstractly free subjectivity with respect to an objective order whose value, and indeed reality, rests solely in its being "absolutely chosen," i.e., integrated into the essential reality of subjective, ethical inwardness.

But unless the finite world preserves an "absoluteness" of its own--even if this is only the negative absoluteness of being irreducibly other than the ethical subject, hence an actuality in its own right--then, on Kierkegaard's own understanding, the existing self cannot realize himself as absolutely concrete subjectivity through choosing, and integrating himself with, such relativities.

The difficulties consequent upon making passionate commitment to finitude the final basis of ethical self-realization appear insurmountable. The subject's free resolve to integrate himself with some finite context or cause cannot eradicate the incommensurability between the ethical requirement to "choose absolutely,"[36] and the particularity of the content of the individual's will--which of its very nature as finite can never possess more than a relative validity: "The tortured self-contradiction of worldly passion arises from the attempt to sustain an absolute relationship to a relative telos . . . ."[37] Thus, unless the content of the individual's will is itself absolute, the authenticity of concrete ethical inwardness remains without foundation. Personality is absolute, for Kierkegaard, only if the free subject, and the reality to which that subject freely relates himself, are both infinite--a condition which can never be met as long as the self continues to seek ethical fulfillment in the "relative telos" of worldly concerns.

Kierkegaard, treating of the relationship between aesthetic and ethical existence, responds to this difficulty by suggesting that

[36] Kierkegaard, Either/Or, II, p. 218.

[37] Kierkegaard, CUP, pp. 377-378.

in contrast to the "worldly passions" of the aesthete, the content of the ethical individual's will is indeed absolute.[38] This is so because the authentic individual's deepest purpose is not to adopt some finite ideal, however worthy or all-encompassing, but to "choose himself, in his eternal validity." The ethical subject, in his infinite freedom, is thus his own infinite content:

> But what is it that I choose? Is it this thing or that? No, for I choose absolutely, and the absoluteness of my choice is expressed precisely by the fact that I have not chosen to choose this or that. I choose the absolute. And what is the absolute? It is I myself in my eternal validity.[39]

But if this infinite self-reflexivity of the ethical will is not to be confused with mere arbitrary self-assertion--Kierkegaard, after all, intends to establish ethical inwardness as absolutely concrete--then the world of the not-self cannot be dismissed as mere positivity, but must be somehow brought into relation with the freedom of the self.

Kierkegaard attempts this when he contrasts the endless relativities of aesthetic experience, in which the individual can assuredly lose himself, with that same finite context, freely chosen and integrated within the unity of ethical selfhood. This approach seems to answer the difficulty of how the self can be both infinite and concrete freedom. The infinitely free self chooses himself, as freedom--thus, both the form of ethical willing and its matter are indeed absolute. Yet, this freely chosen self is neither an empty solipsistic ego nor an already-given finite personality. Rather, the authentic self

> . . . is concrete, for he has chosen himself ethically, has chosen himself in all his concretion, and relinquished all claim to the abstractness of arbitrary will.[40]

[38] See Chapter V, pp. 170 ff.

[39] Kierkegaard, Either/Or, II, p. 218. See also Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 103: "Only in subjectivity is there decisiveness . . . it is the passion of the infinite that is the decisive factor, and not its content, for its content is precisely itself."

[40] Kierkegaard, Either/Or, II, p. 275.

Nevertheless, the purported absoluteness of this concrete self-choosing remains problematic. In order to preserve both the infinitude and the finite concreteness of ethical selfhood, it would seem that the individual must fulfill two contradictory conditions. On the one hand, he must not permit his freedom to be "finitized," by committing himself directly and unequivocally to any particular set of finite ideals.[41] To avoid this, the ethical individual makes himself, qua freedom, the object of his commitment; thus, while he may engage in concrete activities, these become ethically significant only through the infinitizing power of his freedom. In order to escape charges of fanaticism, or arbitrariness of purpose, the ethical individual must render whatever concrete context or cause to which he commits himself an element within the "infinite" unity of his subjectivity. Any other course would compromise the absoluteness of his ethical passion, because it would reduce the object of that passion to a finite thing among other finite things. Yet, on the other hand, if the finite content only becomes infinite through the free commitment of the self, then that self remains an abstractly, rather than a concretely, free subject. If all finitude gains significance insofar as it is a function of my freedom, then the concreteness which finite reality supposedly contributes to ethical selfhood is illusory.

It would seem, therefore, that the ethical subject can preserve the infinitude of his freedom only at the expense of its concreteness; while, on the other hand, if he commits himself to finite ends, perceived as independently compelling, then he "relativizes" his freedom, and reduces himself to "something finite along with other things finite."[42] But if Kierkegaard is to defend the absoluteness of the ethically-existing subject, then he can sacrifice neither the self's free transcendence of all finitude, nor the

[41] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 32; also, p. 174, footnote.

[42] Kierkegaard, Either/Or, II, p. 219. See also ibid., p. 218. "Anything else but myself I never can choose as the absolute, for if I choose something else, I choose it as a finite thing, and so do not choose it absolutely."

ethical imperative to will that which is absolutely concrete--i.e., not reducible to a mere function of free subjectivity. To exist authentically, the individual must find a way to "will the absolute absolutely"--otherwise, the concrete ethical reality he strives to realize will collapse.

The problem besetting the individual in search of authentic selfhood is now seen to rest with the nature of the content of ethical striving. To become fully subjective--and this ethical task, Kierkegaard insists, "is and remains the highest task for every human being"[43]--the individual must fulfill two conditions. Firstly, his subjective will must itself express the fullest possible degree of inwardness--i.e., he must will himself, as subjective, with "infinite decisiveness,"[44] manifesting through his temporal ethical striving the "passion of the infinite."[45] However, unless both the form and the content of this passion are equally infinite, then the subjective will lacks the required concreteness, and the individual remains in a condition of alienation, or inauthentic existence.

Kierkegaard considers three possible sources for the absolute content of ethical willing. The existing subject might sincerely and wholeheartedly commit himself to some particular cause, ideal, or person within the finite world, thereby thinking that he has made an absolute ethical decision. However, if the individual is to be "infinitely interested" in the object of his passion, then his interest cannot rest in some finite object--no matter how worthy such an object might be, it remains an "approximation-object," hence an inadequate content for a will which hungers for the absolute.[46] Neither, however, can the ethical individual simply affirm himself, as pure self-choosing: this kind of absorption in empty selfhood, Kierkegaard argues, leads only to the folly of

[43] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 135. See also pp. 142 and 146.

[44] Ibid., p. 181.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid, p. 32.

mysticism.[47] To become fully subjective, one must indeed will oneself as absolute--but the self thus willed must be a concrete self, a unity of freedom and finitude. And so Kierkegaard turns to a third possibility: he argues that the ethically-existing individual is concretely infinite, since through the repeated choice of himself as an already given reality, he unifies, within existence, the dimensions of infinite ethical freedom and finite aesthetic experience. However, as we have just seen, this solution, too, is tainted with ambiguity.[48]

The problem of how to exist--from Kierkegaard's point of view the only real problem for the existing subject--is the problem of how he can become an essential, and not merely an accidental unity of the temporal and eternal, of the finite and infinite. Yet this ideal seems only partially attainable, if the sole elements in its possible realization are the infinitely free, but abstract, ethical self and his finite, temporal context, nature and history. The self, Kierkegaard insists, can overcome its condition of self-alienation only if it can become an absolute for itself. But this is precisely the central existential dilemma: How can a temporally existing, free yet finite individual, become through its own free activity an absolute content for itself?

3. Solving the Problem of Absolute Self-Realization: The Need for a God-Relationship

As previously suggested, Kierkegaard's vision of authentic subjectivity has a dual foundation. Firstly, he regards the ethical as an absolute standpoint: there is no higher, more certain mode of existence for an individual, since through ethical inwardness alone the subject fully understands and actualizes himself as concrete selfhood. Secondly, however, Kierkegaard also asserts that while the pursuit of authentic selfhood constitutes an ultimate

[47] See above, Chapter V, pp. 173-174.

[48] See above, Chapter VI, pp. 203-205.

concern for the individual, yet the choice of self as absolute cannot be fully realized, unless the individual looks beyond the order of finitude, toward an existential relationship with that which is Infinite in itself. No matter how single-mindedly the existing subject pursues authentic inwardness, this goal will elude him, unless the self which he passionately chooses is an absolute self--and absolute selfhood is not to be attained by directing one's will toward finite possibilities. The only self which could be viewed as absolute is the self who stands in a decisive relationship to the Absolute itself. Thus, if the individual were to affirm himself as "a self who has chosen the Infinite," then and only then would the object of his passionate, absolute self-choosing be correspondingly absolute. It is only when he stands in a freely willed relation to the Absolute that the existing individual discovers himself, within existence, as genuinely concrete subjectivity--as a self who, with justification, can then will himself absolutely. This is Kierkegaard's message when he states:

> Essentially, it is the God-relationship that makes a man a man . . . .[49]

This comment has the character both of an ontological pronouncement on the nature of human selfhood and of an existential challenge grounded in the content of this claim. Kierkegaard holds that ethical becoming is bound up with religious existence--with the individual's God-relationship--not simply because he himself happens to find in religious commitment a source of personal fulfillment, but because he notes an essential connection between the existing subject's quest for absolute ethical selfhood and the believer's hopes for fulfillment in the Divine.

The existential effort to overcome self-alienation--to establish the existing subject as absolute selfhood, a genuine synthesis of the real and ideal, the temporal and eternal, the finite and infinite--remains a vain enterprise, if authentic existence must finally be

[49] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 219. See also Kierkegaard, The Sickness Unto Death, p. 162. "The self is a conscious synthesis of finitude and infinitude, which relates itself to itself, whose task is to become itself, a task which can be performed only by means of a relationship to God."

delineated as nothing but the resolute striving of the subject to transform pregiven but finite possibilities into ethically-significant "infinitized" realities. Such open-ended self-transcendence, while it remains true to the freedom and temporality of existing subjectivity, nevertheless, for reasons discussed above, fails to actualize the self as absolutely concrete individuality. If the individual is indeed to accomplish this self-transformation, then he must somehow be enabled to choose himself, from within the existential nexus, not only with infinite passion, but as an infinite, absolute subjective reality.

When he claims that the God-relationship essentially "makes a man a man," Kierkegaard is maintaining that it is through establishing a free relationship to God, to absolutely transcendent Being, that the fullness of existential selfhood is actualized. Without the foundation of an adequate God-relationship, the existing self remains ontologically incomplete, doomed to an empty self-transcending which struggles ceaselessly with temporality and finitude, and mistakes mere futurity for the eternal. In the context of a relationship to the absolutely eternal, however, the individual can unite his free subjectivity to an infinite content, and thereby realize himself as an absolutely concrete existential synthesis.

In this regard, it is important to note that Kierkegaard is not making a theological claim about the nature of God, when he says that the God-relationship contributes essentially to human selfhood. He is not saying that God is the power which underlies existing subjectivity, but that the existing individual's relationship to the Divine Power constitutes, within existence, the completion of the ethical task of self-becoming. Although Kierkegaard frequently makes statements which seem to presuppose the capacity of the existing thinker directly to know God's nature,[50] he is clear that the only real--i.e., ethically significant--problem for the individual is how existentially to unite his subjective inwardness with the Absolute

[50] See Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 195. "God is infinite and eternal . . ." (ibid., p. 219); "God is the truth . . ." (ibid., p. 178); "God is a subject . . ." (ibid.).

Subjectivity of God:

> All essential knowledge relates to existence. . . . All knowledge which does not inwardly relate itself to existence, in the reflection of inwardness is, essentially viewed, accidental knowledge. That essential knowledge is essentially related to existence does not mean . . . objectively, that knowledge corresponds to something existent as its object. But it means that knowledge has a relationship to the knower who is essentially an existing individual, and that for this reason all essential knowledge is essentially related to existence. Only ethical and ethico-religious knowledge has an essential relationship to the existence of the knower.[51]

The questions of whether God exists and, if so, of his essential nature are speculative problems, and as such outside the legitimate purview of the existing subject:

> The existing individual who chooses to pursue the objective way enters upon the entire approximation-process by which it is proposed to bring God to light objectively. But this is in all eternity impossible, because God is a subject, and therefore exists only for subjectivity in inwardness.[52]

Kierkegaard disclaims all ability to know God directly, arguing in Kantian fashion that the finite subject, immersed in the limitations of temporal becoming, can have no access to a standpoint from which to contemplate the Divine in Itself:

> . . . I am only a poor existing human being, not competent to contemplate the eternal either eternally or divinely or theocentrically, but compelled to content myself with existing.[53]

But, absorbed in existing as he is, the finite subject experiences need for God--a need which grows out of his ontological condition as a potential unity of finite and infinite, but which cannot be satisfied by metaphysical speculation.[54] The only path to God, for such a subject, is the indirect path of <u>self</u>-realization. It is in the context of the quest for authentic selfhood that the existing individual discovers the limits of subjective freedom, and can

[51] Kierkegaard, CUP, pp. 176-177.

[52] Ibid., p. 178.

[53] Ibid., p. 190.

[54] Ibid., p. 140.

finally acknowledge the God-relationship as the sole remaining source of individual ethical fulfillment.

At this point, God becomes an existential postulate--a condition of the possibility of individual ethical self-realization. The infinite passion of the finite subject's need for God is thus fueled by his more fundamental, primary need to will himself as an absolute, absolutely. In order to so choose himself, he must first be an absolute for himself--and it is only if he freely exists, in a subjective relationship to what is Absolute in itself, that this condition may be realized. When the ethically existing self despairs of ever achieving self-reconciliation through his free, "infinitizing" activity within the finite order, he turns to God as to an ultimate existential possibility,[55] and seeks within a God-relationship the key to his own absolute selfhood:

> . . . the only way in which an existing individual comes into relation with God, is when the dialectical contradiction brings his passion to the point of despair, and helps him to embrace God with the "category of despair" (faith). Then the postulate is so far from being arbitrary that it is precisely a life-necessity. It is then not so much that God is a postulate, as that the existing individual's postulation of God is a necessity.[56]

God is what is needed, to bring to fruition the authentic reality of the ethical subject--his essential meaning for the existing self is thus generated from <u>within</u> the existential framework, rather than presented to him in the form of disinterested theological truths:

> . . . only when the individual turns to his inner self, and hence only in the inwardness of self-activity, does he have his attention aroused, and is enabled to see God.[57]

The God whom the existing subject is thus enabled to "see" is evidently not the God of philosophers and theologians, who seek

[55] " . . . the vital principle in the ethical; the possibility-relationship which every individual has to God." Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 139. The <u>reality</u> of God cannot be apprehended by a finite existing subject--yet, this subject <u>needs</u> a <u>relationship</u> of possibility with the (real?) God.

[56] Ibid., p. 179, footnote.

[57] Ibid., p. 218.

insight into the Divine as he is in himself, but rather a God whose very substance is called forth in the mode of a response to the finite ethical subject's urgent drive to actualize himself as a freely existing, yet absolutely concrete personality:

> But freedom is the true wonderful lamp; when a man rubs it with ethical passion, God comes into being for him.[58]

The ethical--the standpoint of freedom--is indeed an insurpassable absolute for existing subjects--so much so, Kierkegaard asserts, that the reality of God manifests itself only to the individual who earnestly pursues his own authentic inwardness. But the freedom of ethical existence is not, Kierkegaard is also insisting, that of an arbitrarily selective subjectivity, for whom God constitutes one possible avenue of commitment. The ethically striving subject exists in a condition of ontological self-diremption--and it is only through freely choosing to place himself in an absolute relationship to the Absolute that the individual can preserve, and fully actualize, his essential reality as an existing synthesis of finite and infinite.

A subjectively appropriated relationship with God--conceived as an absolutely transcendent, eternal Subject--thus appears to offer the ethical individual a way out of the impasse created by his ambivalent status as free, yet finite subjectivity. Within the limits imposed by the duality of infinitely free self-relationality and finite, immediate personality, there appeared no possibility for the ethical subject to transform himself into a concretely absolute individual. But if it is possible for the existing subject to place himself in a relationship to the Absolute, to God, then, Kierkegaard suggests, the ethical striving of the finite individual is not in vain.

Paradoxically, it is the God-relationship--the relation of the existing subject to that which essentially transcends time and finite existence--which Kierkegaard claims alone offers hope that the ethical absolute can be existentially realized. Without an existentially necessary connection to the radically non-existential reality of

[58] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 124.

God,[59] the movement of ethical becoming is simply an abstract self-transcendence. But if such a relationship is not to undermine the very existential becoming whose realization requires it, then the God-relationship must provide an absolute Content for ethical selfhood, without compromising the radical freedom of the ethical will. Authentic selfhood demands, then, that the subject establish a free synthesis between himself, as exising selfhood, and that which is radically Other, i.e., with the Absolute Freedom of God.[60]

So the ethical, says Kierkegaard, is " . . . to be discovered by means of the self-penetration of the individual in himself and his God-relationship."[61] The ethical, which is and remains, as long as the individual exists, "The highest task for every human being," and "The life-principle of the whole . . .,"[62] nevertheless can be realized, within existence, only if the individual is willing to orient himself beyond the order of existential becoming, to risk his very existential freedom in the interest of its fullest actualization:

> The fact is that the individual becomes infinite only by virtue of making the absolute venture.[63]

This "absolute venture" involves the individual in seeking an absolute relationship with the Absolute, a relationship which then can enable

[59] "God does not exist, He is eternal." Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 296. See also ibid., p. 195, "The absolute difference between God and man consists precisely in this, that man is a particular existing being . . . whose essential task is to concentrate upon inwardness in existing; while God is infinite and eternal."

[60] " . . . our enthusiastic ethicist . . . found his enthusiasm in understanding: that God does not need him. . . . And the possibility relationship which is the inspiration of the ethicist is his joy over God, is God's freedom . . . ." Ibid., p. 140. It is interesting in this regard to compare Kierkegaard's insistence on the radical transcendence, the otherness of God, with Hegel's contention that God and man are "internally related" to one another. This kind of internal relatedness, Kierkegaard argues, undermines both human and Divine integrity, by destroying the freedom peculiar to each. Whether Kierkegaard's "existential dialectic" successfully fulfills its aim of preserving the integrity of these mutually opposed elements is one of the chief questions raised in the final chapters of this study.

[61] Ibid., p. 129. See also ibid., p. 141, "All ethical development consists in becoming apparent before God."

[62] Ibid., p. 136.

[63] Ibid., p. 379.

the existing self to "will himself as absolute, absolutely," to become an infinitely concrete subject--but which equally exposes him to the threat of losing that which essentially characterizes him as existing subjectivity, his freedom. The ethical--the free pursuit of ever-deepening inwardness--may be "the life-principle of the whole . . .," but, Kierkegaard insists, the radical individuality of the ethically-existing subject remains a mere abstract inwardness, unless essentially correlated with the Divine. It is precisely because the ethical thus draws together the particular, ethically-striving individual and the Absolute, that Kierkegaard avows that this mode of existence alone is "infinitely concrete."[64]

In the light of this discussion, it becomes clear that, for Kierkegaard, there is no radical distinction to be drawn between the categories of ethical existence and those of religious experience. In fact, the believer's ideal of "eternal happiness," an ideal which presumably requires of him, within existence, an appropriate God-relationship, seems to be shared by the authentically ethical individual. "Eternal happiness," for the ontologically self-alienated subject, would surely entail absolute self-reconciliation. Kierkegaard is claiming that all existing subjects are thus alienated; hence, the quest for self-unification is shared in common by ethical and religious existers. More than this, however, is implied in Kierkegaard's remark that " . . . the religious sphere . . . lies so close to the ethical that they are in constant communication with one another."[65] For if self-reconciliation can only be achieved by "willing oneself as absolute, absolutely," and if, further, the only way thus to will oneself as absolute is to will oneself as a self who has freely united himself with God, the Absolute in himself, then the religious attitude of faith emerges as a profoundly existential--indeed, the supremely ethical--category.

In order to actualize himself as authentic subjectivity, the ethical individual must find a way to choose himself as a being who stands in an existentially appropriate relation to God, i.e., a

[64] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 138.

[65] Ibid., pp. 144-145.

relation which would render him an absolute subject--free, yet in unity with that which transcends his freedom. It would seem that this ethical task coincides with the religious ideal of achieving eternal happiness:

> The task of becoming subjective, then, may be presumed to be the highest task . . . just as correspondingly, the highest reward, an eternal happiness, exists only for those who are subjective . . . .[66]

To become a concretely infinite, existing subject, the individual must come to understand and choose himself--and, for Kierkegaard, the two cannot be separated within existence, where self-knowledge demands the ethical activity of self-actualization--as one who, while immersed in the dispersal of finitude, nevertheless essentially stands in need of eternal happiness:

> In every case where the object of knowledge is the very inwardness of the subjectivity of the individual, it is necessary for the knower to be in a corresponding condition. But the utmost tension of human subjectivity finds its expression in the infinite passionate interest in an eternal happiness.[67]

To achieve this "utmost tension of human subjectivity," and so to give adequate expression to what it essentially means to be an existing subject, the ethical individual is forced beyond the bounds of finite possibilities, to the assertion of faith in the possibility of an absolute synthesis of finite and infinite, in the possibility of eternal happiness:

> It is precisely as a believer that he is infinitely interested in his eternal happiness, and it is in faith that he is assured of it.[68]

> Since man is a synthesis of the temporal and the eternal, the happiness that the speculative philosopher may enjoy will be an illusion, in that he desires in time to be merely eternal. . . . Higher than this speculative happiness, therefore, is the infinite passionate interest in a personal eternal happiness. It is higher because it is truer, because it definitely expresses the synthesis.[69]

[66] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 146.

[67] Ibid., p. 51.

[68] Ibid., p. 53.

[69] Ibid., p. 54. [Emphasis mine.]

Eternal happiness--the union of the finite existing spirit with God--is thus the sole adequate object for the ethical subject's infinite striving. Such happiness involves the synthesis of the particular, individual will of the existing subject--which remains formally infinite only, so long as it lacks an appropriately infinite content--with the eternal reality of the Divine; yet, because no such synthesis can be achieved once and for all within existence, ethical striving culminates in the faith that the synthesis is nevertheless possible, despite the limits placed upon subjectivity by temporal becoming. Thus faith emerges as the very truth of ethical selfhood, since it is only in the mode of faith that the existing subject can give authentic expression to his understanding of himself as absolute selfhood, as a being who exists in essential relationship with God, and who thus is able to "will himself as absolute, absolutely." The deepest goal of ethical existence is to establish the finite spirit as absolute, as eternally happy: " . . . ethically, everything culminates in immortality, without which the ethical is merely use and wont . . . ."[70] Not only is this the chief interest of ethical activity; it is also only through ethical activity--the pursuit of selfhood by the existing individual--that this goal can be realized: "Only in the ethical is there immortality and eternal life . . . ."[71] But if this is Kierkegaard's view, then it follows that there is for him no fundamental cleavage between religious faith and the ethical. Both share a common ideal; and it is arguable that the standpoint of faith is, at bottom, a stage in the ethical quest for absolute selfhood.[72]

The resolution to the ethical problem of how to exist authentically seems then to lie outside the parameters of temporal becoming. The condition of the possibility of full existential self-realization is

[70] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 156.

[71] Ibid., p. 137.

[72] This line of thought is pursued, to some extent, by Nietzsche, whose analyses of moral self-consciousness present religious life (e.g., the saint, the ascetic) as a refinement of ethical interests--and not as a radically new perspective.

that the existing individual can infinitely will himself as infinitely concrete subjectivity. But to achieve this, the individual must establish himself in a concrete union with God, the Infinite in himself. If he were to exist in such unity, he would be "eternally happy": the problem, for an existing subject, however, is how to realize this condition. Clearly, eternal happiness cannot be experienced within temporal existence--it remains, for the existing individual, at best a passionate expectation.[73] Despite the apparent rational incommensurability of finite, existing spirit and God, however, the task of the ethical subject is somehow to draw the two together--and that within existence itself. Such an achievement is closed to the speculative thinker, whose dialectical transformations merely absorb the temporal into the eternal, and dismiss the demands of the individual for a personal union with the eternal as inessential. To the ethically existing subject, however, the ideal of eternal happiness remains of infinite, passionate concern--so much so that his temporal becoming is guided by the quest for its fulfillment:

> . . . it is quite consistently ethical in spirit that the highest pathos of an essentially existing human being should correspond to . . . the idea of eternal happiness.[74]

That this idea cannot be realized through speculative, objective thinking merely indicates to such an individual that he must take other approaches, and not that the problem, however intractible it may seem, cannot be resolved within existence:

> The pathos of the problem consists in expressing this existentially in the medium of existence. It does not consist in testifying about an eternal happiness, but in transforming one's existence into a testimony concerning it.[75]

Kierkegaard claims that the ethically-existing subject who raises himself, in passionate inwardness, to the standpoint of faith, has discovered the means, within existence, to give "definite expression" to this infinite ethical ideal, and hence to achieve his own ethical

[73] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 360.

[74] Ibid., p. 352.

[75] Ibid., p. 353.

self-actualization. Human passion, he insists, "culminates in the pathetic relationship to an eternal happiness"[76]--but, further, "The highest passion in the sphere of human subjectivity is faith."[77]

[76] Kierkegaard, p. 347.

[77] Ibid., p. 118.

Chapter Seven

Kierkegaard's Existential Dialectic

1. The Ground of the Existential Dialectic in Ethical Self-Choice

Kierkegaard insists that to have " . . . willed, in the eminent sense . . . that is . . . from the standpoint of inwardness . . . is an absolute condition for having existed as a human being."[1] The problem for the individual is how he can bring himself to this standpoint of eminent willing, and thus how come to authentically exist. It has been argued above that, if the individual's attempts to will himself as a genuinely existential subject are not to collapse into mere empty self-absorption, or into the arbitrary inwardness of the fanatic, then he must somehow be able, from within existence, freely to appropriate that "specific inwardness of the infinite" which, in turn, will empower him to "will himself as an absolute, absolutely." But given the limitations of finite, temporal becoming, such an ideal seems unrealizable, and the existing subject doomed at best to courageous self-transcendence, unless the finite individual can somehow forge an existential synthesis between himself and non-temporal, Infinite Reality. Only if the focus of the individual's existential willing is itself Infinite--radically transcendent of the relative and the temporal, and hence an absolute Other with respect to finite spirit--can the ethical becoming of the exister understand and express itself as absolute inwardness, and so as infinitely concrete subjectivity.

This deepest need of existence cannot be satisfied solely by striving consciously to unite oneself with one's entire factical

[1] Kierkegaard, CUP, pp. 269-270.

reality. While the resolution to transform all finite "outwardness into inwardness"[2] indicates that the finite " . . . personality announces its inner infinity,"[3] that the subject has indeed made the initial decision to realize himself absolutely, in "all his concretion,"[4] yet, thus to "relinquish all claim to the abstractness of arbitrary will"[5] is simply to set forth upon the path of inwardness, not to approach its fulfillment. In order to sustain its absoluteness, this original choice of self as freedom must constantly be renewed. The very facts of temporality and of the subject's rootedness in finite, relative ends and objects dictate that the struggle for absolute self-integration will be ceaseless, and that ethically willing oneself in one's entire concretion must remain an ideal.

Further, as argued above, the relationship of the individual's "eternally valid" ethical will to the finite order is ambiguous. On the one hand, the freedom of ethical selfhood would seem to demand that the existing subject stand in an attitude of radical opposition to the natural necessity of the empirical world in which he discovers himself.[6] For despite the fact that the individual must eventually will himself in existential unity with the concreteness of the actual world, the very freedom of inwardness is predicated upon the capacity of the subject to withdraw into profound isolation, and thereby actively to define and express himself over against all mere externality or postivity. But if such extreme polarization is the very foundation of inwardness, then how is that "concrete unity" of infinite ethical willing and aesthetic, relative experience which Kierkegaard ascribes to the existential to be realized? Kierkegaard at once defends the concreteness and the absoluteness of ethical self-choice when he claims that in ethical

[2] Kierkegaard, Either/Or, II, p. 256.

[3] Ibid., p. 171.

[4] Ibid., p. 275.

[5] Ibid.

[6] See above, Chapter VI, pp. 199-201.

inwardness " . . . the personality is concentrated in itself, so the aesthetical is absolutely excluded . . . but relatively it is still left,"[7] meaning by this that, having chosen oneself as absolute, and thus becoming radically responsible for all that one is, then that whole finite, aesthetic dimension is drawn back into the new, self-conscious unity of ethical freedom. Thus, the ethical individual " . . . does not become another man than he was before, but he becomes himself, consciousness is unified, and he is himself."[8]

Nevertheless, difficulties with this vision of concrete subjectivity persist. The aesthetic content of existential selfhood cannot be precisely the same finite, relative content as before it was appropriated by the ethical, "infinitizing" will. Kierkegaard speaks of the aesthetic as "the indifferent,"[9] but through ethical choice, the relative content of aesthetic life becomes an essential correlate of the subject's free activity of self-unification. Thus, it is neither an "indifferent" externality, nor does it make an independent claim upon the ethical self's interest, because of its own intrinsic validity. Rather, it is significant precisely qua "chosen by the ethically free will." Thus, the concreteness which the ethical subject seeks to realize by choosing himself, not abstractly, but in his manifold particularity, seems to dissolve, through the action of that very existential willing whose explicit goal it is to sustain and preserve it.

The radical authority and freedom of ethical inwardness seems to militate against a concrete synthesis of finite and infinite within existence--i.e., a synthesis in which both sides remain themselves, but in essential unity with one another--because, insofar as finite relativity is drawn within the sphere of subjective freedom, it becomes, essentially, an existential "possibility" for the self, whose primary task remains always his own realization,

[7] Kierkegaard, Either/Or, II, p. 182.

[8] Ibid., p. 181.

[9] Ibid.

as freedom and inwardness. Thus, the order of finitude acquires ethical reality, through serving to further this fundamental goal.

The ethical subject therefore faces a dilemma. If the aesthetic, finite order were to be considered as irreducibly independent, intrinsically valid, hence calling forth certain responses and responsibilities from the ethical subject, then the radical freedom definitive of the ethical will would be compromised. However, if the finite dimension does not retain such a genuine otherness vis à vis the self, then the concreteness of ethical personality is thrown open to question. So not only does the self require a genuine "other," over against which his freedom can actualize itself, as concretely ethical; this other must further manifest an infinitude, a freedom, of its own, such as cannot, through becoming a content for the ethical self, reduce the infinite striving of the ethical will to a self-contradictory finiteness,[10] but whose infinitude, nevertheless, will not simply undermine the infinite freedom of ethical existence. In sum: a fully actual, concretely infinite subjectivity is possible only for the existing individual who can freely relate himself to that which radically transcends finite existence, and which thereby manifests itself as the sole adequate correlate for the infinitely striving existential will.

From out of the extreme pathos generated by the existing subject's deepening recognition of his own self-diremption, and of the seeming futility of seeking self-reconciliation within the parameters of existence itself, emerges the exister's despairing acknowledgment of his need for a God-relationship. Only if he chooses himself as one who stands in a freely willed relationship with the Infinite in Itself, the Absolute Subject, can the existing individual hope to realize his own concrete inwardness--to become, in religious language, "eternally happy."

Eternal happiness is not to be confused with a condition of subjective bliss. Such personal joy no doubt would be a natural concomitant of realizing a standpoint of unity between the existing self and the Absolute; but it is the reconciliation of finite spirit

[10] Kierkegaard, CUP, pp. 377-378.

with the Divine Other, and the consequent annulment of self-alienation, which constitutes the significant content of an eternal happiness. It must further be remembered that, within existence, such a state cannot be achieved once and for all, but must constantly be freely reenacted. Thus, for the authentic exister, his eternal happiness remains an ideal, completely informing his subjective becoming, to be sure, but nevertheless the stimulus for the pathos of repeated striving and for ever-deepening self-expression, rather than an occasion for tranquil enjoyment.

For Kierkegaard, the existing subject only "wills in the eminent sense of the word," and so fully exists as a human being, when he wills himself as eternally happy; and he can only do this if he can successfully transform his entire existence into a "testimony concerning it":[11]

> The development or transformation of the individual's subjectivity, its infinite concentration in itself over against the conception of an eternal happiness, that highest good of the infinite--this constitutes the developed potentiality of the primary potentiality which subjectivity as such presents.[12]
>
> The pathos which adequately corresponds to an eternal happiness consists in the transformation by which everything in the existence of the individual is altered, in and through his mode of existence, so as to bring it into conformity with the highest good.[13]

Authentic ethical selfhood, then, does not require of the individual that he acquiesce in any doctrine about the relationship of finite spirit to the Infinite, but only that he persistently will himself, in conjunction with the Eternal Itself:

> If an existing individual is to realize a pathetic relationship to an eternal happiness, his existence must express the relationship . . . .[14]

So the problem for the individual who would fully realize himself as ethical inwardness--who would "will, in the eminent sense of the word"--reveals itself as the problem of how the

[11] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 353.

[12] Ibid., p. 116.

[13] Ibid., p. 356.

[14] Ibid., p. 352.

exister can express, within existence, his God-relationship. Kierkegaard maintains that "the ethical alone is certain," and that only through existing in the ethical does finite spirit attain a knowledge "which may not possibly in the last moment transform itself into a hypothesis . . . the only secure knowledge . . . ."[15] It is now becoming clearer precisely what is entailed by the certainty which "concentration on the ethical"[16] generates, and what is demanded of the exister who aspires to it.

Throughout this study, it has been claimed that, for Kierkegaard, the primary goal of ethical existence is genuine self-knowledge--knowledge which is not abstractly doctrinal or objective, but which gives concrete expression to what it is to exist as finite subjectivity. In existential knowledge, thinking and action are inextricably linked, so that the development of ethical inwardness requires a "knowing which is also a doing." The ethical individual seeks to "understand himself in existence,"[17] but this understanding is incomplete, unless he can "express existentially what he has understood, and in this manner . . . understand himself."[18] Thus, the ethical goal of self-realization entails both an ever-deepening consciousness of the dualistic and "pathetic" structure of existence, with its polar oppositions of finite and infinite, temporal and eternal, and an accompanying "revelation," within the life of each individual, of the dynamic tensions which characterize finite existence:

> Existence involves a tremendous contradiction, from which the subjective thinker does not have to abstract . . . but in which it is his business to remain. . . . The subjective thinker is a dialectician dealing with the existential, and he has the passion of thought requisite for holding fast to the qualitative disjunction.[19]

[15] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 136.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid., p. 314.

[18] Ibid., p. 315.

[19] Ibid., p. 313.

> . . . existential pathos dedicates itself more and more profoundly to the task of existing, and with the consciousness of what existence is, penetrates all illusions, becoming more and more concrete through reconstructing existence in action.[20]

Thus to "penetrate all illusions" is the task confronting the exister, and along with the realization of this task comes that certainty which it is the province of the ethical alone to achieve.

But this ethical certainty--the active expression, hence understanding--of what it is to exist as finite spirit, is fully realized neither by the exister who simply chooses himself as absolute freedom, nor by the individual who seeks to transform his subjective freedom into an absolute subjectivity by drawing himself into concrete unity with the finite, aesthetic order. To become an infinitely concrete subject would be to achieve the certainty, the "secure knowledge" which is the goal implicit in all ethical striving. But this security eludes the exister, so long as his ethical focus remains tied to the finite, relative world. The very attempt fully to realize himself through establishing an absolute relationship to himself, as a subject essentially involved only in the finite order, leads the individual to the painful recognition that the ethical quest for self-knowledge cannot find satisfaction in that direction. Indeed, yet another illusion which the ethically-striving individual must penetrate on the path to self-knowing is the deceptive hope that ethical subjectivity can discover in the realm of finite content an "other" adequate to its own infinite becoming.[21]

When Kierkegaard proclaims that "the ethical alone is certain," he means by this that only by actively "transforming everything

[20] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 387. See also p. 122, " . . . the human being who is inspired by ethical enthusiasm . . . hating and abhorring every form of deception . . ." alone knows that God and man are radically other, that "God needs no man."

[21] This is the final message implicit in Judge Wilhelm's treatment of the ethical life, in Kierkegaard, Either/Or, II, where, in "Ultimatum" the "Jutland priest" exposes the vanity of the ethicist's hope that finite and infinite can be reconciled through the agency of human freedom alone. The hopelessness generated by this realization is, however, redeemable by faith in Divine Omnipotence.

into inwardness,"[22] through the power of freedom, do we existing individuals arrive at genuine self-knowledge, a knowing which is neither merely empirical, nor abstractly metaphysical, and so will not "at the last moment transform itself into a hypothesis."[23] However, the individual who resolutely "embraces this modest ethical task"[24] encounters difficulties which ultimately force him beyond the boundaries of the strictly ethical mode, to seek the conditions of self-realization in the sphere of the ethico-religious.

Thus, the initial ethical choice of the self as freedom, and the persistent effort to render this freedom infinitely concrete through ethical activity within the context of exclusively finite ends, are but the initial steps on the path to "secure knowledge." As a temporally-existing subject, the ethical individual must strive to maintain himself in his original self-choosing--but, in so doing, he becomes aware that, in order to actualize himself as infinitely concrete inwardness, further choices, further elaborations of his initial effort at self-expression are required of him. The fundamental choice of self as freedom remains abstract, and in the last analysis arbitrary, unless this original turn to inwardness can be transformed, through an "existential dialectic," into an infinitely concrete unity of the temporal and the eternal.

But, this infinite concreteness comes into being only for the individual who is capable of risking everything, of risking all finite ambitions and possibilities, in order to achieve selfhood:

> Ethically, the highest pathos is interested pathos, expressed through the active transformation of the individual's entire mode of existence in conformity with the object of his interest. When an individual abandons himself to lay hold of something great outside him, his enthusiasm is aesthetic; when he forsakes everything, to save himself, his enthusiasm is ethical.[25]

[22] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 227.

[23] Ibid., p. 136.

[24] Ibid., p. 228.

[25] Ibid., p. 350.

The ethical goal is to "save oneself," to become fully-concrete existential inwardness; but this concreteness requires that the individual abandon all finite goals and strive instead to unite himself with the eternal, while nevertheless preserving the finitude, the temporality without which his free, decisive willing of eternal happiness would collapse into a mere speculative recollection of the individual's a priori rootedness in eternity:

> The speculative principle is that I arrive at the eternal retrogressively through recollection, and that the eternal individual is in this manner directly related to the eternal. But an existing individual can have a relationship to the eternal only as something prospective . . . .[26]

No direct relationship between the individual and the eternal is possible within existence--yet, the ethically-existing individual strives for certainty, for that "secure knowledge" which, we have seen, can alone be had through establishing an absolute relationship with the Absolute, and hence a standpoint of infinitely concrete subjectivity, of absolute self-certainty. But this ethical self-certainty does not rest on the speculative dialectical mediation of opposites, which replaces the restlessness of temporal becoming with the illusion of a final unity with the Absolute. Although it is certain that the existing subject can fully realize himself as ethical inwardness only through a God-relationship, it is equally certain that such a relationship remains, for the temporally existing individual, a matter of expectation, rather than an actuality.

Thus, the existential dialectic whereby the ethical exister strives to approach an adequate relationship with the Absolute carries within it an irreducible dimension of uncertainty--indeed, the presence of this negative moment of uncertainty assures the existing individual that he continues to stand within existence, and so constitutes a positive indication that no spurious mediation of time and eternity has occurred.

> For Ethics does not have the medium of being, but the medium of becoming, and consequently rejects every explanation of becoming which deceptively explains

[26] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 380.

> becoming within being, whereby the absolute decision that is rooted in becoming is essentially revoked . . . .[27]
>
> . . . if we concede mediation there is no absolute choice . . . .[28]

To continue within existence, while yet constituting himself as an individual who stands in an absolute relationship to the absolute--hence to himself--requires that the exister act as a radically free subject. That is, he must reveal himself before God, the Absolute, as absolutely decisive--a being who chooses himself as "eternally happy," in unity with the Eternal, but as still standing within his own existential, uncertain situation.[29] Without this aspect of uncertainty, the very freedom of the exister (i.e., his capacity to hold together, through decisive willing, the incommensurable poles of finite and infinite within existence), Kierkegaard insists, would be no freedom at all. If the identification of finite existence and eternal Being were simply to follow logically from the very nature of things, the freedom of existential inwardness--the individual's "possibility-relationship with God"--would be the greatest illusion of all, and the ideal of a genuinely concrete subjectivity equally deceptive.

But for Kierkegaard, it is precisely in the very nature of things that individual existence cannot be subsumed within any all-embracing systematic unity:

> But the principle of identity is merely the limit; it is like the blue mountains in the distance, or like the line which the artist calls his base line. . . . The principle of identity therefore determines a lower point of view than the principle of contradiction, which is more concrete. Identity is the terminus a quo, but it is not a terminus ad quem for existence. . . . Instead

[27] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 377.

[28] Kierkegaard, Either/Or, II, p. 177.

[29] "Faith is precisely this paradox; that the individual as the particular is higher than the universal . . . that the individual as the particular stands in an absolute relationship to the absolute." Søren Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, trans., Walter Lowrie (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 66.

> of identity annulling the principle of contradiction, it is contradiction that annuls identity . . . .[30]

The logical priority of contradiction over identity, Kierkegaard maintains, can be seen to follow from the structure of existence itself, since within temporal becoming, the torture of self-alienation constitutes the fundamental experience of the subject, an experience which can be annulled only with the annulment of existence. The "identification" of an exister with the Eternal can therefore only occur when the exister, resisting all temptations to mediation, freely affirms the irreducible chasm between himself and the Infinite. The existing subject can achieve a God-relationship--but he must do so indirectly, through the power of the negative:

> . . . the existential relationship to the absolute good is for an existing individual determined only through the negative--the relationship to an eternal happiness only through suffering, just as also the certainty of the faith which sustains a relationship to an eternal happiness is determined through its uncertainty. If I take the uncertainty away--in order to get a still greater certainty--then I do not get a believer in his humility, in fear and trembling, but I get an aesthetic coxcomb . . . who wishes . . . to fraternize with God, but who, speaking precisely, stands in no relationship to God whatever. The uncertainty is the criterion, and the certainty without the uncertainty is the criterion for the absence of a God-relationship.[31]

An existing individual can never directly know--"furnish a positive demonstration,"[32] whether he has a God-relationship; to demand such objective certainty would be to finitize God, and so would positively indicate the condition of standing in no God-relationship whatever.

[30] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 377. Kierkegaard here uses the terminology of Hegel (identity, annulment, etc.) but only to make the point that Hegelian dialectic but inadequately comprehends existential reality. In a sense, however, this citation represents a misinterpretation of Hegelian logic: Hegel's notion of "identity" is not so empty as Kierkegaard suggests. "There are many kinds of identity," Hegel says in the Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion, and so Kierkegaard's "Either/Or" of identity or contradiction, as an ultimate principle for existence, is itself highly abstract in Hegelian terms.

[31] Ibid., p. 407. [Emphasis mine.]

[32] Ibid.

Nevertheless, Kierkegaard claims, the ethical attempt to bring oneself into relationship with the Infinite can be viewed as productive of genuine existential certainty. If the individual is certain that he has metaphysical knowledge of God, or that he has become one with God through faith, then, most certainly, he has not achieved these states; but when he suffers in an ever-deepening anguish of uncertainty regarding the adequateness of his efforts, then the existing subject does approach the "secure knowledge" that his ethico-religious selfhood is being realized. Such knowledge has no trace in it of the abstract or the objective, for while it is indeed a self-understanding, it is an understanding which is a product of freedom, of the activity of seeking self-actualization, rather than of detached contemplation.

> The fact is that the individual becomes infinite only by virtue of making the absolute venture.[33]

So in order genuinely to exist--i.e., to "know" himself to stand in a certain relationship to God--the individual must constitute himself as infinitely decisive, as one who makes "the absolute venture" through freely choosing to risk all, for the sake of an existentially uncertain eternal happiness. He must, in other words, come to apprehend himself as existing in a condition of irremediable uncertainty with respect to the ideal of unity with God, a state which he nevertheless freely wills and perpetuates, as the basis for expressing and realizing himself as an infinitely concrete, self-certain individual.

Only to achieve the ideal of the "absolute ethical good,"[34] or eternal happiness, can such an absolute venture even be undertaken. The will, and its content, Kierkegaard insists, must be commensurable; if the individual aspires to realize some "relative telos," absolutely, he falls into fanaticism or arbitrariness, hence his individuality is in fact not infinite, but finite and

[33] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 379. See also Kierkegaard, The Sickness Unto Death, p. 211, " . . . the self is . . . infinitely potentiated when God is the measure. The more conception of God, the more self . . . only when the self as this definite individual is conscious of existing before God, only then is it the infinite self . . . .

[34] Ibid.

relative; whereas if he tries to appropriate the genuine infinitude of God through finite means, through mere reflection, for instance, or through attending church and performing other such religious rites "faithfully," then he makes only a limited personal commitment, and so expresses in his very existence that his is not, after all, a relationship to an absolute telos, but rather to a relative end which must be somehow integrated among all his other concerns and daily preoccupations. Both the will and its content must be infinite, if one is to maintain an absolute relationship to an absolute telos--there must be revealed "the absolute correspondence of like to like."[35]

Yet, the criterion for establishing the exister's will as indeed infinite, and hence as a will which stands in an authentic relationship to God, "the Infinite itself," is entirely negative. This is so because, within temporal existence, the Infinite as such, hence eternal happiness, cannot be grasped. Echoing Kant, Kierkegaard claims that neither metaphysical nor empirical knowledge of God or of a future life is possible for the finite individual. Kant, however, holds that one can nevertheless infer the rational necessity of God and immortality from the very nature of moral experience--faith then is not entirely divorced from thought. For Kierkegaard, existence itself sets up a barrier between man and God, such that " . . . there is nothing to be said of an eternal happiness except that it is the good which is attained by venturing absolutely everything."[36]

In other words, the criterion for establishing that the individual stands in a God-relationship, or at least that such a relationship is possible, is neither reason, nor some objective standard such as church attendance, good deeds, or prayer. Rather, the gulf between existential becoming and Eternity is an absolute one; the individual can bridge it only indirectly, through personally demonstrating the infinite extent of his commitment to this absolute telos: " . . . the existence of the absolute ethical good can be proved only by the individual himself expressing it existentially in existence."[37]

[35] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 377.

[36] Ibid., p. 382.

[37] Ibid., p. 379.

The form for expressing this relationship existentially is the mode of uncertainty. Through his persistent striving to achieve authentic subjectivity, the existing individual increasingly comes to understand himself as radically other than the Divine--to recognize that, from the point of view of existence, the "principle of contradiction is more concrete"[38] than the principle of identity.

2. The "Via Negativa" of Ethical Becoming

The progress of the exister's struggle to realize an "absolute relationship to the absolute" is thus measured by his deepening acknowledgment of the gulf between God and man. This gulf cannot be mediated--indeed, the continuing expression of the difference between the finite and the Infinite constitutes the very concreteness of individual existence. The subject's certainty that a God-relationship alone would actualize his freedom as ethical inwardness is dialectically linked to a commensurate uncertainty regarding the possibility of effecting that relationship:

> . . . if I am in truth resolved to venture, in truth resolved to strive for the attainment of the highest good, the uncertainty must be there, and I must have room to move, so to speak. But the largest space I can obtain, where is room for the most vehement gesture of passion that embraces the infinite, is uncertainty of knowledge with respect to an eternal happiness, or the certain knowledge that the choice is in the finite sense a piece of madness . . . .[39]

One could characterize the movement of the individual's search for ethical selfhood, therefore, as a dialectic of deepening uncertainty, at its extreme limit, the subject's uncertainty regarding the possibility of eternal happiness becoming a mark of certainty.

The truth of the individual's absolute venture is thus determinable indirectly, in accordance with whether he experiences himself as being in a state of radical uncertainty regarding his hopes for

[38] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 377.

[39] Ibid., p. 382.

achieving the "needed" union with the absolute good, while nevertheless being resolved to attempt it:

> . . . since this good can be described only by reference to the mode of acquisition, the absolute difficulty of the acquirement is the only mark by which the individual's relationship to the absolute good can be known.[40]

The ethical subject therefore can measure his progress toward an adequate God-relationship by referring constantly to the degree of risk which the ascent to eternal happiness demands of him. At the (ideal) point where existential uncertainty reveals itself as absolute, there the certainty which ethical existence alone offers the finite subject would be realized, since, Kierkegaard argues, it is there that the exister experiences himself--hence knows himself--as standing in a genuinely existential relationship with the Infinite itself, and so as having realized himself as absolutely concrete subjectivity.

The way to the fulfillment of ethical selfhood is thus a via negativa: only when the exister experiences himself as infinitely uncertain regarding the possibility of a God-relationship does he know, in the existential sense, that he has indeed chosen himself as an absolute, absolutely. The subject who strives to accomplish this absolute self-choice does so through a series of radically decisive "movements," an existential dialectic characterized by varying degrees of risk: he moves from a standpoint of "infinite resignation," through suffering and guilt, to the point where the category of faith emerges as a genuine existential possibility.

The subject who follows this road must be willing to abandon all finite ends and interests, in the name of the infinite ideal of eternal happiness;[41] but beyond this, arise even greater risks, since no matter how determined the exister may be to become "infinitely resigned," there remains a vast gulf between the ethical ideal of expressing the absoluteness of his interest in the eternal and the concrete enactment of that ideal within temporal becoming. The subject thus comes to understand ethical existence as a condition

[40] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 383.

[41] Ibid., pp. 352 ff.

grounded in suffering, a yearning after an absolute God-relationship which must in principle elude one who is bound up with time and finite circumstances.[42] Such a suffering individual might well be tempted, Kierkegaard observes, to seek refuge in the notion that existence itself is to blame for his state of diremption, and therefore to despair of himself as absolute.[43] However, precisely at this point in the dialectic, the suffering exister faces the next great challenge on his negative path to ethical realization. He must now choose himself as guilty--he must freely acknowledge and assume responsibility for himself as a being who in principle cannot achieve reconciliation with the Infinite itself. Thus, he must risk the loss of the ethical ideal itself, the ideal of a freely accomplished union with the Absolute, hence self-realization through the infinitizing power of ethical willing. With the acceptance of himself as essentially guilty comes the recognition of the intrinsic limits of his infinitizing subjective freedom; and so in the face of this experience of guilt, the opportunities for despair and for self-deception are great. Faced with such an overwhelming certainty of his own absolute self-diremption, the exister may well be tempted either to embrace subjective freedom simply as a mode of ceaseless striving within the parameters of temporal becoming, or to abandon the ideal of individual ethical self-realization and await with humility a possible bestowal of healing grace from a transcendent source.[44] Either alternative, however, drains existence of its concreteness--in the first instance, by robbing it of that dimension of transcendence, of Absolute Otherness without which, Kierkegaard claims, the quest for

[42] Kierkegaard, CUP, pp. 386 ff.

[43] Ibid., pp. 470 ff.

[44] Some later existentialist philosophers, it may be argued, follow this existential dialectic up to the point of acknowledging the exister as "guilty"--but do not proceed forward toward the kind of "faith" Kierkegaard describes. For instance, Sartre's view of existential freedom parallels in some respects Kierkegaard's strictly ethical mode of existence; while the later Heidegger, disillusioned with existential humanism, to some extent exemplifies the latter alternative of "waiting upon Being."

absolute ethical selfhood is indeed a "useless passion"; in the second instance, by disregarding the element of "subjective appropriation" which, for Kierkegaard, is the very heart of individual existence.

If the ethical exister is to apprehend himself as absolutely concrete selfhood, both these polar dimensions must somehow be preserved. This is the challenge which ultimately faces the existing subject, and which, Kierkegaard claims, he can meet only by choosing to open himself to a final risk, that of faith. The summit of the exister's struggle toward ethical certainty is thus the infinite uncertainty characteristic of the act of faith: through faith alone can an existing individual hope to achieve that certainty which is the fulfillment of the ethical goal of "penetrating all illusions." The individual "inspired by ethical enthusiasm" is unique, says Kierkegaard, in "abhorring every form of deception";[45] he alone, therefore, has the courage to finally acknowledge that "God may require everything of every human being; everything and for nothing."[46] In other words, he affirms the fearful yet "edifying reflection" that "over against God we are always in the wrong."[47]

[45] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 122.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Ibid., p. 239. Kierkegaard observes here that in Either/Or he deliberately followed the plan of "keeping the work within ethical categories," but that the fact that it nevertheless ended in the "edifying truth" (ibid., p. 229) regarding the God/man relationship was highly significant, revealing, as it were, an intrinsic difficulty in any attempt too strictly to separate religious categories from ethical ones. The chief difficulty, for Kierkegaard, lies in claiming that an exister can "win himself" through ethical striving, in isolation from specifically religious inwardness. While an individual can exercise his subjective freedom in order to despair, once having despaired of himself, he cannot then regain himself through the very freedom whose efficacy he has radically negated. "In the moment of decision, it is that the individual needs divine assistance" he declares (ibid., p. 231)--thereby asserting the existential significance of the leap of faith, which affirms the power of God to make whole that very self of which the purely ethical exister can only despair. Therefore, he insists, "The ethical and the religious stages have in fact an essential relationship to one another" (ibid., p. 261), indicated

To an existing subject whose chief preoccupation is to establish himself, through freedom, in an absolute relationship to the absolute, such profound acquiescence in human finitude may seem to banish all hope of ever achieving such a relationship. Yet, Kierkegaard insists, it is precisely through this radical act of self-negation that the genuine certainty of self-realization becomes possible:

> The edifying reflection at the close of Either/Or, "that over against God we are always in the wrong," constitutes no determination of sin as a fundamental condition, but is merely the discrepancy of the finite and the infinite brought to rest in an enthusiastic cry in which the finite spirit appeals to God, within the sphere of freedom: "I cannot understand Thee, but still I will love Thee, Thou art always right, even if it seemed to me as if Thou didst not love me, I will nevertheless love Thee." . . . the edifying is not sought in the annulment of the misunderstanding but in the enthusiastic endurance of it, and in this final act of courage as if bringing about its annulment.[48]

So an absolute--i.e., infinitely free--relationship to the Absolute cannot be achieved by transcending one's own finitude, by evading the truth of the radical distinction, the "misunderstanding," between the existing individual and God. Rather, Kierkegaard claims, only the exister who has the courage to acknowledge and to resolutely hold fast to his existential isolation, his irremediable finitude, achieves that infinite inwardness which is the certain mark of the God-relationship:

> He is in an infinite relationship to God when he recognizes that God is always in the right, in an infinitely

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not only by the fact that it is necessary to have first "understood the existential relationship between the aesthetic and the ethical in order to be at this point [of the leap]" (ibid., p. 231), but also by the recognition that it is through the leap (which, in effect, places ethical freedom itself at risk) that the ideal of ethical selfhood can hope to be actualized. The difficulty with Either/Or, says Kierkegaard, is that "it was rounded out to a conclusion ethically" (ibid., p. 261), a shortcoming which the existential dialectic of the Concluding Unscientific Postscript is intended to redress: "If the religious is in truth the religious, if it has submitted to the discipline of the ethical and preserves it within itself, it cannot forget that religious pathos does not consist in singing and hymning and composing verses, but in existing" (ibid., p. 348).

[48] Kierkegaard, CUP, pp. 239-240. [Emphasis mine.]

> free relationship to God when he recognizes that he himself is always in the wrong. In this way, therefore, doubt is checked, for the movement of doubt consists precisely in the fact that at one instant he might be in the right, at another in the wrong . . . and this was supposed to characterize his relationship to God. But such a relationship to God is no relationship, and it was the nutriment of doubt.[49]

Doubt, says Kierkegaard, merely finitizes the God-relationship, since it introduces the element of degree into that whose unique existential value and import rest in its absoluteness. Between finite human beings, it is inevitable that relations should "consist in a more or less,"[50] but when it is the Infinite itself to whom an exister wishes access, then such claims that with respect to God, one is "to a certain degree in the right, to a certain in the wrong"[51] compromise the radical transcendence and absolute freedom of the divine will, while also reducing the exister's own supposedly absolute commitment, to another species of "approximation-knowledge." Only the unequivocal affirmation that man and God are irrevocably Other--the certainty that "God needs no man . . ." and that with God "every human being is an unprofitable servant"[52]--constitutes an adequate existential expression for the God-relationship. When this certainty reaches its apex, all doubt, in the finite sense, falls away, so that the individual "knows," albeit indirectly, through the negative, that he has before him the form for genuine ethical selfhood.

Kierkegaard asserts this radical separation of the Divine and the human in deliberate contrast to Hegel's view that man and God are dialectically related in such a way that finite, subjective Spirit, and Infinite, Absolute Spirit mutually complete (mediate) one another. His understanding of "dialectic" reflects his opposition to all mediation, insofar as it is the project of an existing subject. Dialectic, as Kierkegaard describes it, is an essentially

[49] Kierkegaard, Either/Or, II, p. 354.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 122.

negative movement, whereby the individual exister gives increasingly clear expression to the radical distinction between the poles of human and Divine, finite and Infinite spirit, and so ultimately brings himself to the position from which the "uncertainty" of the leap of faith stands forth as the only "certain" possibility for existential fulfillment:

> . . . dialectics is in its truth a benevolent helper, which discovers and assists in finding where the absolute object of faith and worship is--there, namely, where the difference between knowledge and ignorance collapses in absolute worship with a consciousness of ignorance, there where the resistance of an objective uncertainty tortures forth the passionate certainty of faith. . . . Dialectics itself does not see the absolute, but it leads, as it were, the individual up to it, and says: "Here it must be, that I guarantee; when you worship here, you worship God." But worship itself is not dialectics. A dialectics that mediates is a derelict genius.[53]
>
> Everything has its dialectic, not indeed such a dialectic as to make it sophistically relative (this is mediation), but a dialectic by which the absolute becomes manifest by virtue of the dialectical.[54]

So when the exister has "made the absolute distinction," i.e., through the power of dialectic has established himself in a radically negative relationship with the Absolute and so is infinitely uncertain regarding the possibility of eternal happiness, then he has "penetrated all illusions," and achieved certainty. The way to this standpoint of certainty is a series of dialectical movements--not mediations, but rather freely chosen transitions--wherein the exister, striving to "express his own nature most adequately"[55] recognizes that the truth of existence, the truth of subjective inwardness, is unrealizable, apart from its negative relationship with the Divine:

> . . . a direct God-relationship is aesthetic and is really not a God-relationship . . . because the discrimination of the absolute has not been accomplished. In the religious sphere, the positive is recognizable by the negative. The most exuberant sense of well-being, in the

[53] Kierkegaard, CUP, pp. 438-439.

[54] Ibid., p. 468.

[55] Ibid., p. 369.

> delight of immanence, which exults in joy over God and the whole of existence, is a very lovable thing, but not edifying and not essentially a God-relationship.[56]

The existential priority of seeking a God-relationship is the truth which emerges from the ethical quest for self-understanding, a quest which fulfills itself only through the negative path of self-diremption and self-abnegation. Conversely, religious existence is essentially ethico-religious, since unless one is an inwardly existing individual, the pursuit of a God-relationship remains a hollow enterprise, an aesthetic or intellectual undertaking couched in categories of self-deception.

3. The Stages of Religiousness A

It is now clear that any adequate appreciation of the nature and significance of Kierkegaard's use of the category of finite subjectivity demands a closer assessment of the relationships among the several movements of this negative dialectic, especially the manner in which the "Religion of Immanence" (Religiousness A) points beyond itself to the fulfillment of the ethico-religious ideal, through faith in the Absolute Paradox of the Christian Incarnation (Religiousness B). We have already seen that the strictly ethical exister's attempt at self-realization[57] founders upon the recognition that human freedom is ultimately powerless to effect that synthesis of finite and infinite, of necessity and possibility, which is its essential task. Only if God, the Absolute as such, becomes an explicit element in the ethical exister's quest can any hope for resolving the impasse be justified. Even though--or perhaps precisely

[56] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 497, footnote.

[57] As exemplified in the persona of Judge Wilhelm, in Either/Or. The futility of reconciling the "is" and the "ought," nature and freedom, was already a problem in Kant's ethics--a problem he resolved by arguing for the rationality of an eternal order and a God, through whom the "summum bonum" could be effected. Kierkegaard refuses to accept such a "postulate," which treats God as an object of human thought, hence as finite--yet, a God-relationship, he maintains, is not thereby ruled out, but becomes more "necessary" than ever.

because--the pursuit of this relationship takes the finite subject along a path of ever-escalating challenges to freedom, Kierkegaard insists that the God-relationship is nothing less than a life-necessity for the exister.

The explicitly God-oriented activity which animates the "religion of immanence" functions to accentuate ever more deeply the pathos and vanity of finite man's aspirations to eternal happiness. Yet, for Kierkegaard, this negative dialectic constitutes the very condition of the possibility of genuine selfhood, for only at the point of extreme existential despair can faith, the "category of despair," present itself. Why this standpoint of faith is the sole redemptive hope for the ethical subject can only be appreciated if we first examine the attempts of the exister to accomplish a God-relationship, and thence self-synthesis, through the unaided workings of subjective freedom.

> The self is composed of infinity and finiteness. But the synthesis is a relationship, and it is a relationship which, though it is derived, relates itself to its own self, which means freedom. But freedom is the dialectical element in the terms possibility and necessity.[58]

> The self is the conscious synthesis of infinitude and finitude which relates itself to itself, whose task is to become itself, a task which can be performed only by means of a relationship to God. But to become oneself is to become concrete . . . a synthesis. If, on the contrary, the self does not become itself, it is in despair, whether it knows it or not.[59]

> Despair is potentiated in proportion to consciousness of self; but the self is potentiated in the ratio of the measure proposed for the self, and infinitely potentiated when God is the measure. The more conception of God, the more self; the more self, the more conception of God. Only when the self as this definite individual is conscious of existing before God, only then is it the infinite self; and then this self sins before God.[60]

The existing self is a potential synthesis of infinity and finiteness, of possibility and necessity, whose essential task is to realize himself concretely as consciousness and freedom. When the

[58] Kierkegaard, The Sickness Unto Death, p. 162.

[59] Ibid., pp. 162-163.

[60] Ibid., p. 211.

ethical subject tries to actualize himself as this concretely self-determining relation, however, he opens himself to despair, to the recognition that through ethical activity he can never hope to "express the synthesis." Not until he understands that the implicit ground of ethical self-realization is God, the Infinite itself, and makes the God-relationship the explicit focus of his striving, does the exister confront the possibility of authentic selfhood. The choice of oneself as absolute requires that the self choose itself as a "self in relationship to God, the Absolute as such." The dialectical movements which Kierkegaard unifies in the Postscript under the heading "Religiousness A" describe the struggle in which the exister becomes increasingly conscious of the existential necessity of a God-relationship, while at the same time increasingly despairing of his capacity, through the exercise of subjective freedom, to give this relationship, and thence his own selfhood, concrete existential expression.

i. The Initial Expression: Infinite Resignation

> The first genuine expression for the relationship to the absolute telos is a total renunciation.[61]

If the ethico-religious goal of eternal happiness is treated simply as one possible good among others, then the exister sustains only an aesthetic relationship to it--i.e., he sustains no real relation to an absolute telos, for by transforming it into a finite "relative volition"[62] he has also finitized the absolute content of the volition: "The absolute telos exists for an individual only when he yields it an absolute devotion."[63] Therefore, the exister stands in an appropriate relationship to the "highest good" only when he renounces all finite interests, in order to concentrate, exclusively and "at every moment,"[64] upon willing a God-relationship,

[61] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 362.

[62] Ibid., p. 353.

[63] Ibid., p. 355.

[64] Ibid., p. 353.

and hence upon his eternal happiness.

The comprehensiveness of the renunciation thus provides a (negative) criterion of the presence of a genuine relationship to the absolute:

> The individual can therefore readily determine for himself how he stands toward an eternal happiness, or whether he has any such relationship. He need only submit his entire immediacy, with all its yearnings and desires, to the inspection of resignation.[65]
>
> If the idea of eternal happiness does not transform his existence absolutely, he does not stand related to it; if there is anything he is not willing to give up for its sake, the relationship is not there.[66]

While these statements suggest that resignation is a task which can be accomplished, once for all, by the sufficiently enthusiastic individual, this is not Kierkegaard's meaning. No existing individual can look for certainty in temporal matters, so that any commitment to the activity of detaching oneself from finite interests must assume the form of an infinite striving:

> . . . since eternal happiness is a telos for existing individuals, these two (the absolute end and the existing individual) cannot be conceived as realizing a union in existence in terms of rest.[67]

There can be no "deceptive" result, no mediation of the temporal and the eternal, within existence; only the persistence of the struggle

[65] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 353. This category of "infinite resignation" first appears in Kierkegaard's writings in Fear and Trembling (1843), where the Jewish patriarch, Abraham, who was willing to sacrifice his only son at God's command, represents the paradigm for the infinitely resigned individual, i.e., one who is capable of abandoning all worldly concerns or ideals--even universal ethical obligations toward one's fellow man, if need be--as an indication of one's fundamental complicity with God, the Absolute. Such resignation is not identical with faith, since it is within the power even of pagan consciousness (e.g., Socrates). Yet it is a movement essentially preparatory for making the leap of faith.

[66] Ibid., p. 352.

[67] Ibid., p. 355; see also p. 366, "In the great moment of resignation, [the individual] . . . committed himself by a choice, and it is now . . . his task to acquire . . . facility in the renewal of this choice, and in giving it existential expression."

to "keep the wound of the negative open" furnishes an indication that the individual remains genuinely pledged to his task of renunciation.

Resignation therefore offers no escape route from the rigors of temporal becoming. Even though the individual who seeks to become infinitely resigned is now conscious that a God-relationship alone would assist him to self-realization, he is not thereby absolved of the continuing responsibility for conforming his thought, and its expression, to the "structure of existence."[68] Rather, by recognizing the magnitude of the requirement to become infinitely resigned, the exister deepens his understanding of what it means to "have himself as a task." He acknowledges, on the one hand, that the choice of himself as infinitely concrete (eternally happy) entails the choice of himself in relationship to God; but he further realizes that the ethical obligation to become "absolutely related to the absolute" has as its context, and indeed is unavoidably implicated with, his status as a finite, temporal subject. This realization, achieved in freedom, is a ground for despair.

If man were a merely natural being--i.e., if the synthesis of finite necessity and infinite possibility were simply given, as objective attributes of the human entity--then, Kierkegaard says, the existing individual could have no ethical dimension, no obligation to become himself, but neither would he be capable of despair. But his ontological condition instead is that of freedom: "The self is a relation which relates itself to its own self,"[69] he is a spiritual being, whose existence therefore is always a "potentiable" synthesis, which must continuously be brought about through the subject's own free activity. But though self-unification is thus the unsurpassable duty of the existing spirit, at the moment of greatest self-expression and self-choosing the attitude of despair is correspondingly profound:

> Despair is the disrelationship in a relation which relates itself to itself.[70]

[68] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 74.

[69] Kierkegaard, The Sickness Unto Death, p. 147.

[70] Ibid., p. 148.

The more intense the subject's attempts to fully express himself as free self-relationality, the clearer becomes the essential futility of this ethical ideal, until, at the point where the exister stands, "as this definite individual . . . before God,"[71] at the point at which he most fully "potentiates" himself, there he falls into infinite despair:

> Despair is potentiated in proportion to consciousness, but the self is potentiated in the ratio of the measure proposed for the self, and infinitely potentiated when God is the measure.[72]

The entire existential dialectic has as its aim the overcoming of self-alienation, of despair--yet, paradoxically it seems, when the individual finally apprehends the true nature of existential selfhood by actualizing himself in relationship to God, despair becomes most acute. The choice of himself as a self in relation to God has been accepted by the ethical subject as the sine qua non for realizing authentic individuality; yet now it appears as if it is precisely an authentic God-relationship which casts the exister into radical self-diremption. What can be the nature of fully-potentiated selfhood, and of the God-relationship which is its foundation, such that its very realization condemns the existing individual to this condition?

It is important to remember here that, for Kierkegaard, there is a radical gulf between theological and philosophical (objective) concepts of God, and the existential (subjective) relationship to God. But despite this essential elusiveness of the divine nature, the existing individual discovers that his need for God is "precisely a life-necessity." It is because he is engaged upon the struggle for authentic ethical existence that this demand for a God-relationship comes into prominence for him--thus, God's reality is no metaphysical construct, to be rationally proven or mystically intuited, but rather is a possibility, implicit in the existing individual's choice of himself as absolute. The effort fully to apprehend the structure of his own existence as freedom-

[71] Kierkegaard, The Sickness Unto Death, p. 211.

[72] Ibid.

within-finitude reveals to the exister his ethical "complicity with God," so that the God-relationship appears both as a condition of the possibility of actualizing the freedom of existential selfhood, but also as coming into being only through the agency of the self's infinitizing, subjective will:

> Only when the self as this definite individual is conscious of existing before God, only then is it the infinite self.[73]
>
> Freedom is the true wonderful lamp; when a man rubs it with ethical passion, God comes into being for him.[74]

Considerable ambiguity regarding the significance of God for the exister is thus evident here.

On the one hand, it is precisely because he is acknowledged as the Absolute Subject, a Freedom radically transcendent of existential freedom-within-finitude, that God is, for the exister, the sole adequate terminus of his ethical striving.[75] If the individual subject's will cannot be grounded in such Absolute Otherness, then charges of mere subjectivism and of arbitrary fanaticism can be laid, with justification, against the ethical subject's claim to absolute self-certainty.[76] On the other hand, this temporally existing subject, whose self-realization is contingent upon the Absolute Otherness and Freedom of the Divine, at the same time must continually "preserve the structure of existence" in thought and expression--i.e., must persistently occupy himself with actualizing his infinite subjective freedom within the context of finite necessity. Human freedom is essentially negative: it is the self's capacity to define, to establish itself, as self-certain inwardness, over against all otherness. All externality, therefore, becomes for it a realm of possibility, the significance of which is mediated by the subjective will. But if this infinite negative freedom is the arbiter of what shall be considered of ethico-religious value for an

[73] Kierkegaard, The Sickness Unto Death, p. 211.

[74] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 124.

[75] See above, Chapter VI, section 3.

[76] See above, Chapter VI, section 1.

existing subject, then God, too, must come before such a self not as he is in himself--i.e., as Absolute Otherness, the Being who is, who does not exist--but as an existential possibility, a "life-necessity," whose significance is determined by his relationship to the individual subject: "Freedom is the true wonderful lamp; when a man rubs it with ethical passion, God comes into being for him."[77]

The free individual has here "brought into being" a God-relationship--but the question now is: can such a relationship, which is entirely within the power of the ethical exister's will both to effect and sustain, truly be a relationship with God, the Infinite itself? Does not the infinitely self-certain negativity of the exister's will undermine exactly what it needs to affirm, i.e., the utter independence of the Divine? Kierkegaard insists not: "But whoever rubs the wonderful lamp of freedom becomes himself a servant--for the Spirit [of the lamp] is Lord."[78] He argues, then, that in the very attempt to effect a God-relationship through freedom alone, the exister encounters the limits of that freedom, and learns, therefore, more deeply than ever before, what it means to be a finite, existing spirit. God "comes into being" through the exercise of existential freedom--indeed, it is not because the exister is explicitly seeking God, but because he seeks self-certainty, that the need for a God-relationship arises. But, if that relationship is to have God, the Absolute as such, as its true content (as it must if the exister is to choose himself absolutely), then the status of the individual subject with respect to the Divine must undergo a transformation. And in fact, Kierkegaard says, this is precisely the discovery which the ethical self makes at the apex of its own infinite self-assertion. The infinitely free individual discovers himself to be a servant, and is humbled before the Absolute, transcendent Power of the Divine Other:

> Only when the self as this definite individual is conscious of existing before God, only then is it the infinite self. And then the self sins before God.[79]

[77] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 124.

[78] Ibid.

[79] Kierkegaard, The Sickness Unto Death, p. 211.

In order fully to become himself, the individual needs a God-relationship--he must come to exist before God. But the key word here is "exist." God, says Kierkegaard, needs no man, but demands that the existing individual become himself: the ethical exister becomes "apparent before God," then, when he is most fully himself, and he is most fully himself when he "expresses the structure of existence" in his own existence. Since existence is temporal, it involves the persistent diremption of finite and infinite, of freedom and necessity, as much as it points toward and demands their synthesis. To fully exist, then, is to be caught up in temporal striving, to passionately, decisively will the unity of these polarities, within a context which dictates their constant separation:

> One who distinguishes absolutely has a relationship to the absolute telos and ipso facto also a relationship to God. The absolute distinction is just the thing to clear a space about the absolute end, so as to make room for it. . . . It keeps the mob of relative ends at a distance, in order that the absolutely distinguishing individual may effect a relationship to the absolute. There is nothing meritorious in the attempt of an existing individual to approximate the equilibrium which possibly exists for the Eternal; for one who exists, the passionate decisiveness is precisely the maximum.[80]

The God-relationship, then, does not change the individual's existential condition, but rather serves to accentuate it absolutely: " . . . the individual may be carried out of existence . . . in passion; but it is precisely in the moment of passion that he receives an impulse toward existing."[81]

Thus, the individual expresses his nature as an exister most adequately when he absolutely distinguishes himself and that Eternal Reality in which he acknowledges his existence is nevertheless grounded:

> But as between God and a human being . . . there is an absolute difference. In man's absolute relationship to God this absolute difference must therefore come to expression. . . . Precisely because there is an absolute difference between God and man, man will express his own

[80] Kierkegaard, CUP, pp. 369-370.

[81] Ibid., p. 358.

> nature most adequately when he expresses this difference absolutely.[82]

But to struggle to distinguish absolutely between himself and the Reality which alone offers the exister hope of self-reconciliation, is surely a formula for suffering, and ultimately despair.

The central problem, for such an individual, lies with the nature of existential freedom. The ontological status of the exister, as freedom-within-finitude, dictates both that the individual pursue a God-relationship and that the actualization of this relationship should transcend the scope of his human powers. On the one hand, the existing subject is infinitely, yet negatively free: he defines and actualizes himself over against all otherness, all externality--and so he absolutely defines and actualizes himself when he distinguishes himself absolutely from the absolute Otherness of God. However, as existential becoming, he is also inextricably immersed in finitude: hence, the adequate expression of his human nature equally demands, of this infinitely free individual, that he humbly distinguish himself, in his mere finitude and temporality, from the Eternal Oneness and Power of the Divine.

> . . . if the task is to exercise oneself in the absolute relationship, existence becomes exceedingly strenuous, since there is always a double movement to be executed.[83]

The absolute distinction which the exister who wills a God-relationship must make is "exceedingly strenuous" because it requires him both to "infinitely resign" all commitment to finite, relative aims (thus indicating, indirectly, his absolute orientation to God, and in so doing, actualizing himself as infinite negative freedom) and simultaneously constantly to acknowledge and existentially express his temporal finitude:

> The task is to exercise the absolute relationship to the absolute telos, striving to reach the maximum of maintaining simultaneously a relationship to the absolute telos and to relative ends, not by mediating them, but by making the relationship to the absolute telos absolute, and the relationship to the relative ends relative.[84]

[82] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 369.

[83] Ibid., p. 366.

[84] Ibid., pp. 364-365.

In order to make the absolute distinction between God and man possible, and thereby "to effect a relationship to the absolute,"[85] the ethical exister must first accomplish an "absolute distinction" within the structure of his own existence. He must distinguish absolutely between, on the one hand, his own finite, relative interests and capacities and, on the other, the absolute interest in the absolute telos.

Between these two polar dimensions of existential selfhood, as between man and God, no mediation is possible. The exister, therefore, must repeatedly occupy himself with reaffirming and sustaining their radical separation, while at the same time, resolutely and freely holding them together as aspects of existence. Since it is only through achieving existential knowledge of his own radical self-diremption that the individual can then meaningfully affirm the absolute distinction between himself (as this infinitely striving being who must simultaneously pursue both relative and absolute aims) and the Eternal, and since the accomplishment of such self-knowledge is itself an infinite ethical undertaking, then, indeed, the ideal of achieving a genuine God-relationship recedes, becoming infinitely uncertain. The exister's task--through freedom to achieve a negative relation to all finite immediacy,[86] while at the same time refusing to mediate them, "remaining in the relativities of life"[87]--is one which itself engages him absolutely. He can, it seems then, never get to the point of making the absolute commitment to God, in the interest of which this secondary task of self-distinguishing has arisen. The exercise of subjective, existential freedom, which demands realization in a God-relationship, is precisely what prevents the infinitely striving temporal subject from accomplishing this ideal. Struggling to obey the ethical command to become a concretely infinite subject, the exister experiences ever more deeply the intractable oppositions which beset existence, and thus is well launched on the path to despair.

[85] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 370.

[86] " . . . by taking away the power from immediacy . . . ." Ibid., p. 386.

[87] Ibid., p. 365.

ii. The Essential Expression: Suffering

The exister who seeks "the absolute relationship through renunciation"[88] has both acknowledged his need of a God-relationship and taken the initial step toward realizing it. However, his efforts simultaneously to maintain an absolute relationship to the Absolute and a relative relationship to the relative have only confirmed the "ideality," and therefore the irreducible pathos of this task. This deepening uncertainty regarding the possibility of eternal happiness now becomes itself the "essential expression" for the individual's God-relationship, a condition which cannot be transcended, but which the finite subject must suffer so long as he exists:

> But suffering as the essential expression for existential pathos means that suffering is real, or that the reality of the suffering constitutes the existential pathos; and by the reality of the suffering is meant its persistence as essential for the pathetic relationship to eternal happiness. It follows that the suffering is not deceptively recalled, nor does the individual transcend it. . . . Just as resignation looked to see that the individual has an absolute direction toward the absolute telos, so does the persistence of suffering guarantee that the individual remains in the correct position and preserves himself in it.[89]

But what is the content of this extraordinarily persistent form of suffering? Normally, one views suffering as a negative state, to be assuaged whenever possible--indeed, much human virtue is bound up with efforts to alleviate suffering. Further, the category usually indicates a burden of externally originating conditions, which the sufferer must passively bear. Yet, Kierkegaard claims that the persistence of suffering is essential to authentic existence, extolls it as "the distinguishing mark of religious action,"[90] and "the highest action in inwardness"[91]--thus contradicting the ordinary moral and commonsense understanding that suffering is an enemy imposing itself upon us from without, which must be borne courageously, and if possible conquered.

[88] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 386.

[89] Ibid., pp. 396-397.

[90] Ibid., p. 387. [Emphasis mine.]

[91] Ibid., p. 388. [Emphasis mine.]

But for the ethico-religious exister, the struggle to achieve an appropriate God-relationship confers a new significance upon the category of suffering. Such an individual has already recognized the contradictory nature of his ethical task: ethical freedom orients him toward an "absolute relationship to the Absolute," and yet the exercise of freedom separates the exister from the Divine. Indeed, the finite individual most clearly realizes himself when he absolutely distinguishes himself from the Absolute, preserving in that act his subjective freedom. The state of yearning and isolation which the pursuit of his ethical ideal engenders provides the exister with more than sufficient grounds for suffering. But the pathos of the suffering individual becomes extreme when he becomes conscious that this condition is coextensive with existence itself, and in fact is essential to the very structure of existence, which it is his duty to express:

> But essential existential pathos is essentially related to existence; and to exist essentially is inwardness, and action in inwardness is suffering, for the individual cannot make himself over. . . . And it is for this reason that suffering is the highest action in inwardness.[92]

The ethical individual who acknowledges his plight has penetrated yet another illusion about the structure of existence. He now understands himself as <u>essentially</u> a sufferer, as one who urgently needs to "make himself over," but who is unable to do so. Since this is <u>existential</u> knowledge, the exister must translate his understanding into action. The self who truly knows himself to be essentially a sufferer must "become what he is": he must freely appropriate that knowledge <u>of</u> suffering (the knowledge that he is not, and cannot, through his own efforts, hope to become eternally happy) so that it becomes a <u>suffering</u> knowledge, freely gained through "action in inwardness."

The conventional religious wisdom that "all men are sufferers" must be construed in the light of existential self-understanding. Taken in the literal and empirical sense, this saying simply refers to the unhappy circumstances of all human life--sickness, pain,

[92] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 388.

loss, and, even if these are through good fortune avoided, the inescapable suffering of death. But the typical classification of men into the fortunate, who have avoided or perhaps even conquered suffering, and the unfortunate, for whom suffering yet persists, fails to expose the real role of suffering in existence. When a "religious sermonizer" consoles the unfortunate with such relativist bromides as that "there are many still less fortunate than you" or that "through misfortune the soul is strengthened,"[93] so that the sufferer appears more favored of fortune than his less-tried fellows, then, says Kierkegaard, he obscures the absolute significance of suffering within existence, by mistaking mere accidental, external factors for the true locus and content of suffering:

> The much revered orator forgets that religiosity is inwardness, that inwardness is the relationship of the individual to himself before God, his reflection into himself, and that it is precisely from this that the suffering derives, this being also the ground of its essential persistence to the religious life . . . .[94]

On these criteria, even the most fortunate of men remains a sufferer; while, even if they persist through an entire lifetime, the contingencies of misfortune do not constitute that essentially persistent suffering which marks authentic religious existence. Such suffering has to do with "the relationship of the individual to himself before God,"[95] rather than with the fluctuations of his connection with natural conditions. The individual whose goal is eternal happiness must therefore acknowledge suffering as intrinsic to his very existence, rather than seeking ways to transcend or neutralize it.

The root of religious suffering is the ethical individual's need for an "absolute relationship to the Absolute," coupled with the consciousness that even the utmost exertions of human freedom cannot evoke that relationship within temporal existence. The individual who understands himself as freedom-within-finitude understands also, therefore, that he is essentially a sufferer, a being who must remain, at one and the same time, true to both his temporality and

[93] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 391.

[94] Ibid.

[95] Ibid.

to his eternal consciousness, a being whose self-experience is essentially contradictory:

> Viewed religiously, it is necessary . . . to comprehend suffering and to remain in it, so that reflection is directed upon the suffering, and not away from it.[96]

Even if the ethical individual is certain that happiness is only possible through a God-relationship, this is not at all to say that, if he acknowledges and pursues this goal, then happiness will follow. Indeed, just the reverse: by means of the God-relationship, the religious exister leaves behind the false dichotomy of fortune and misfortune--but in its place he discovers a quality of suffering which, if he is to "express the structure of existence" in his own life, he can have no desire to eradicate:

> . . . suffering is rooted in the fact that the individual is separated from his happiness, but also signifies that he has a relationship to this happiness, so that to be without suffering is to be without religion.[97]

In his very unhappiness, therefore, in his radical uncertainty regarding the possibility of eternal happiness, the suffering exister experiences his closest approach to a God-relationship: " . . . suffering is precisely the expression for the God-relationship . . . ."[98] The religious exister is an "unhappy consciousness"--his "relationship to himself before God" is essentially a contradictory one. On the one hand, he struggles to be himself--both radically free, capable of asserting authority over all finite immediacy, yet continuously subject to its claims. Standing before the Absolute, such a being experiences himself in a doubly ambivalent manner: not only his absorption in finite immediacy, but his very freedom itself, now appears as a hindrance to achieving that which alone would redeem existence. He discovers that he cannot effect a God-relationship through freedom, because it is precisely this existential freedom, this infinite openness to becoming, which separates him from God, while yet enabling him to apprehend God as

[96] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 397.

[97] Ibid., p. 406.

[98] Ibid., p. 405.

the Absolute Other, the sole adequate terminus for the ethical will:

> The religious individual is reflected inward, is conscious of being existentially in process of becoming, and yet maintaining a relationship to an eternal happiness.[99]

The authentically religious individual never transcends suffering, because he can never transcend existence, that ontological condition which seeks, and yet undermines, its own self-transcendence.

Confronted with this tortuous conflict, a speculative thinker might propose, Kierkegaard remarks, that once the sufferer understands the true nature and purpose of his dilemma, by that very fact he transforms the suffering into a higher order of joyousness. Thus, it is "not the suffering which is the essential expression for the God-relationship, but the rejoicing . . .,"[100] into which the suffering has been dialectically elevated. But Kierkegaard insists that it is impossible to "transform suffering into a constantly annulled moment,"[101] because the suffering is precisely the existential expression for the fact that it is an exister, a being who is free yet finite, who seeks eternal happiness. To dialectically transform such suffering into joy, the individual would have to "transform his status from that of an existing individual to that of an eternal being . . ."[102]--that is, to a being who is not struggling toward eternal happiness, but who actually possesses it. But even the most self-aware individual cannot do this, since his every attempt merely reconfirms his bondage to finitude and becoming:

> But if he cannot do this, he is again in the situation of suffering, because this knowledge must be held fast in the medium of existence. . . . The pain of this circumstance is again the essential expression for the relationship.[103]

For an exister, then, there is no higher certainty, with respect

[99] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 406.

[100] Ibid., p. 404.

[101] Ibid.

[102] Ibid., p. 405.

[103] Ibid.

to the possibility of eternal happiness, than he reaches in the radical uncertainty--the suffering--which signalizes the presence of a genuine orientation toward the Absolute:

> . . . the existential relationship to the absolute good is for an existing individual determined only through the negative--the relation to an eternal happiness only through suffering. . . . The uncertainty is the criterion, and the certainty without the uncertainty is the criterion for the absence of a God-relationship.[104]

The religious exister more clearly effects an absolute relationship to the Absolute--therefore, is more fully himself--when his "suffering becomes the certainty--the correct expression for the uncertainty."[105]

Through "action in inwardness," the self-reflective exister gains existential knowledge of his essential status as sufferer. He now experiences himself as radically uncertain regarding the possibility of eternal happiness, because he encounters at every turn the difficulty of trying simultaneously to express himself as both a being entangled in finite immediacy and a being who passionately wills a God-relationship:

> The religious man lies in the finite as a helpless child; he desires absolutely to hold fast to the conception [of God], and precisely this annihilates him; he desires to do all, and while he summons his will to the task, his impotence begins, since for a finite being there is always a meanwhile; he desires to do all, to express this religious absoluteness, but he cannot make the finite commensurable therefor.[106]

Suffering therefore persists "even in the most highly developed religious personality,"[107] says Kierkegaard, because as long as he lives the individual is an exister, whose every movement to transcend the structures of existence through the exercise of freedom merely tightens the grip of time and relativity. Even the self-conscious realization that suffering has a positive function, as a negative indication of the presence of a God-relationship, does not liberate

104 Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 407.

105 Ibid., p. 410.

106 Ibid., p. 433.

107 Ibid., p. 412.

the exister, enabling him to transmute his suffering into joy. For when he appropriates this profound understanding, he does not become eternal, he does not once and for all "die away from the immediate."[108] Instead, he recognizes even more lucidly the unbreakable hold it exerts upon him, and the absolute contradiction, which he can do nothing to mediate, between his finitude and his infinite willing of the absolute telos:

> . . . the absolute conception of God does not consist in having such a conception en passant, but consists in having the absolute conception at every moment. This is the check on his immediacy, the death verdict which announces its annihilation . . . for absoluteness is not directly the element of a finite creature. And as one who is sick, and cannot move because he feels pain everywhere, and as one who is sick and cannot keep from moving as long as he lives, although he feels pain everywhere--so the religious individual lies fettered in the finite with the absolute conception of God present to him in human frailty.[109]

The religious individual suffers the pain of the absolute difference between finite existence and the Absolute, as well as the radical conflict within himself between finite concerns and the absolute concern for eternal happiness. Indeed, he is these contradictions: suffering is no content, imposed upon him from without--rather, he himself is both the sufferer and the source and content of the suffering. He experiences himself as a divided subjectivity, a self whom his every effort to heal merely casts more deeply into a condition of self-diremption and uncertainty.

Thus facing "the suffering of being human and at the same time existing before God,"[110] the religious individual recognizes that he "can do absolutely nothing of himself," but is as "nothing before God."[111] Not only is the human "absolutely different" from the Absolute, but the existing individual who fully apprehends this, and so becomes essentially a sufferer, must acknowledge that all his

108 Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 432.

109 Ibid.

110 Ibid., p. 437.

111 Ibid., p. 412.

"action in inwardness"--all his suffering, which he now sees to be his very self--is without power or significance:

> Religiously, it is the task of the individual to understand that he is nothing before God, or to become wholly nothing, and to exist thus before God; this consciousness of impotence he requires constantly to have before him, and when it vanishes the religiosity also vanishes.[112]

This is surely the apotheosis of suffering, for here the individual admits that even the value of his own suffering existence is nugatory.

The deepest suffering to which the exister must submit, and which, further, he must labor to express existentially, is, then, the "pain of his annihilation . . . before God." But this individual, who is conscious that " . . . self-annihilation is the form for the God-relationship,"[113] now stands in a paradoxical situation. For an exister, all essential knowing is inextricably linked with the continuing active expression of that knowledge, within existence: therefore, the knowledge of his nothingness before God must be existentially appropriated and expressed. But an extreme difficulty attaches to this enterprise, for how is the suffering individual to express the consciousness of his own nothingness without, in that process, contradicting that self-understanding? Surely, any exertion on the part of the exister--and particularly the supreme exertion required wholly to negate his own significance--must indicate that, after all, his freedom and courageous resolve thus to deny himself are somewhat meritorious?

The paradoxical insight which the exister who has reached this degree of self-understanding must acknowledge, and somehow express, is that his insight, and the attempt to express it, are of no significance before God. "The religious . . . proclaims that the greatest exertion is nothing--at the same time requiring it."[114] If he is truly to become what he is, before God--an uncertain, suffering, finite subject, whose very existence is the absolute antithesis of the Divine--then the exister must penetrate and resist the illusion of the " . . . last temptation, that the utmost exertion

112 Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 412.

113 Ibid.

114 Ibid., p. 414.

seeks to deceive one with the apparent significance of being something."[115] That very certainty of self, which has served as the touchstone of the exister's progress from aesthetic life through the several stages of ethico-religious striving, now appears as the matter for a new form of temptation. For if he holds fast this ethical certainty of himself as a being capable of such a radical act of self-abnegation, then he clearly denies that he is "nothing, before God." Such an exister has not truly relinquished "everything, and for nothing," for he has retained his pride in himself, his certainty of himself as a subject who can absolutely abandon himself to suffering, and thus, through his own power, actualize himself before God.

This is the unique temptation to which those who try to achieve a God-relationship through either monasticism or religious asceticism are susceptible. Such individuals have already reached a standpoint of intense inwardness: as "tried and tested religious personalities"[116] they are aware of the need for resignation. They have struggled to maintain "an absolute relationship to the Absolute, and a relative relation to the relative," and have encountered and accepted the burden of suffering which this absolute requirement imposes on existing individuals. But precisely this very strength and hard-won self-knowledge now constitute their greatest barrier to a genuine God-relationship. Neither the monk--who retreats to the cloister, abandoning the world and all its distractions, in order to exercise "an absolute respect for the absolute telos"[117]--nor the ascetic--who subjugates and denies his finite, natural individuality in order to glorify the Divine--actually achieves what he so profoundly desires.

[115] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 415. Kierkegaard uses the Danish word "Anfoegtelese," which Swenson translates as the German "Anfechtung," in order to make up for the failure of English to distinguish linguistically between the temptation which attracts and that which repels. The former is the more common form--where the individual is enticed by pleasure, etc., and is too weak to resist. "Anfechtung," however, is a temptation which comes only to the strong--those in the final stages of religious development, who genuinely understand the difficulty of realizing the absolute relation, and at that point "discover the limit, and the conflict of Anfechtung becomes an expression for this limit" (ibid., p. 411).

[116] Ibid., p. 415.

[117] Ibid., p. 359.

Monastic life bases itself on the certainty that absorption in the finite world, and the "thought of God,"[118] are incommensurable. Its solution therefore was to break with the finite, to leave the world behind, and to single-mindedly concentrate upon "the labour of holding fast" the thought of God.[119] But neither the world, nor the exister's worldly self, is truly left behind upon entering a cloister. Although the monastic movement, particularly at its height in the Middle Ages, was motivated by a desire, through suffering the negation of the world, to exercise the absolute relationship, no total renunciation of finitude could in fact result from this enterprise.

The failure of monasticism is two-fold. Firstly, although the move to the cloister is a bold attempt to "risk everything" for the sake of the absolute telos, it nevertheless does not comprehend the radical implications of its own ideal. If one is indeed to renounce "absolutely everything,"[120] to become a total sufferer, then even the worth of one's own choice to absolutize this suffering must be negated. If an absolute, passionate respect for the Absolute is to be truly attained, then " . . . it is also necessary to prevent this absolute passion from acquiring even the colour of earning or deserving an eternal happiness."[121] Monasticism errs in this regard by presenting itself as a particularly meritorious means for men of exceptional spiritual strength to effect a God-relationship. In a sense, monasticism seeks, like speculative thought, to transmute the suffering of finite existence into a higher form, which then embodies more adequately the exister's goal. But if the suffering individual is truly to become "as nothing," then neither his freely-affirmed isolation and insignificance, nor his infinite, devotional striving to realize an absolute relation, can be counted as enhancing his worth before God. The resolve to enter the cloister " . . . must not be regarded as something meritorious"; on the contrary, the

118 Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 422.

119 Ibid., p. 415.

120 Ibid., p. 362.

121 Ibid.

individual who has recourse to monastic life must take this step " . . . in all humility before God . . .,"[122] as a sick person would gratefully accept the aid of a physician.

The second error of monasticism is its failure to appreciate that religious suffering is "action in inwardness":

> The questionable character of the monastic movement . . . lay in the fact that the absolute inwardness, presumably in order to afford an energetic demonstration of its existence, created for itself a conspicuous expression in a distinct and special outwardness.[123]

As a result monasticism, despite its strenuous effort to realize the absolute relationship, through suffering the loss of all immediate selfhood and all worldly involvements, itself emerges as a peculiarly distinctive way of life, whose practitioners "create a disturbance in the finite"[124] and so fail truly to exist and suffer in absolute inwardness. Precisely because they are so conspicuously detached from finite concerns, the inhabitants of the cloister reserve unto themselves a unique worldly function and significance. Their very humility, therefore, becomes a direct outward sign of their inner intent toward self-abnegation. But if the religious exister has complete confidence in his inwardness--as monasticism, Kierkegaard points out, does not--then no such external expression is either necessary or possible. Indeed, the very existence of outward indications of suffering inwardness only serves to mitigate the extent of the suffering, and so reveal that the individual is <u>not</u>, after all, an absolutely negated subject.

If an individual in truth <u>expresses</u> that "before God, he can do nothing," then, paradoxically, his every outward act will lack distinctive significance, and so be entirely incommensurate with the passion of his inwardness, and therefore "expressive" of the genuine locus of his God-relationship:

> . . . the less outwardness, the more inwardness, and an inwardness expressed through its opposite (the outwardness of being wholly like all others, and that there is

122 Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 371.

123 Ibid., pp. 362-363.

124 Ibid., p. 370.

> outwardly nothing to see) is the highest inwardness--provided it is there.[125]

By this standard, not only the cloistered individual, who gives finite, outward expression to his effort to negate the finite order, but also the religious ascetic, who outwardly expresses his nothingness through "self-torture," "flagellations, and the like,"[126] fail to fulfill the religious requirement, wherein "the greatest exertion is nothing." The ascetic strives to increase his negative power over every dimension of his own selfhood; he values his own extreme suffering, and his will to suffering and self-annihilation, such that martyrdom and death become for him the highest manifestation of his self-divided and dividing freedom.[127] Thus, he yields to the highest temptation, which arises from discovering the paradoxical nothingness of human freedom before God.

Both monastic withdrawal from the world and ascetic self-negation are superhuman attempts to achieve an absolute relation to God; what they fail to recognize is that such efforts, however enthusiastic and devout, actually lead the exister further from his ideal. This is because, while such undertakings struggle to express the "absolute difference between God and man," they are in truth attempts to resemble God, by assuming responsibility and credit for effecting,

[125] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 370.

[126] Ibid., p. 414.

[127] In his Genealogy of Morals (Third Essay) Friedrich Nietzsche comments penetratingly upon the psychology of asceticism, and draws similar conclusions regarding the hidden motives behind the ascetic's will to self-negation. However, while Kierkegaard sees asceticism as a temptation, to be surmounted by the authentically religious individual, Nietzsche criticizes all religious ideals as extreme developments of ethical self-consciousness, and claims that Christianity, in particular, exhibits a kind of "moral decadence" which undermines genuine human dignity and satisfaction with the finitude of human life. Much useful light could be shed upon the role of the category of the "finite subject" in contemporary existentialism, if one were to examine Kierkegaard's ethico-religious individual, with Nietzsche's psychology of asceticism in mind (e.g., the "ladder of religious cruelty," outlining the various degrees of sacrifice and negation to which an exister can aspire, can be seen as Nietzsche's subtle metaphor for the profound consciousness of "nothingness before the Absolute" which permeates Kierkegaard's stage of religious existence).

through self-negation, an adequate expression for this absolute difference.

The form for expressing the absolute difference is not God-like effort, but rather humility, which " . . . frankly admits its humble lowliness . . . before God . . ."[128] and actively expresses thereby the ultimate limits of human action and freedom. To take pride and comfort in one's humble posture, or even in the struggle not to yield to such pride, is still to remain in an inadequate God-relationship, because one has not yet fully acknowledged or appropriated one's finitude and humanity. If suffering separation from the Absolute is the essential expression for the reality of being human, then superhuman suffering neither elevates the individual to a plane above other existers, nor draws him, in any direct sense, closer to God. Therefore, the "immediately religious," or "awakened,"[129] individual who adopts suffering as a badge of religious superiority, and even "goes cheerfully to meet his martyrdom,"[130] confident that this absolute suffering will yield an absolute reward, lacks that hidden suffering in inwardness which characterizes the authentic religious exister.

While a love between two human beings has a natural external expression in the union of the lovers, an adequate external expression of that profound uncertainty, and yearning, impotent isolation which characterizes religious existence, forever eludes the temporal, finite subject. The God-oriented individual cannot even directly aspire to the ascetic height of martyrdom, since such outward suffering would distinguish him from other men and tend to diminish the essential isolation of humanity before God. The suffering recognition that suffering cannot be mitigated or transcended--that the finite subject both needs an absolute relation to the absolute, and is utterly unable to actualize this relation--constitutes the essentially persistent "martyrdom" to which all religious existers, and by implication all men, are condemned:

128 Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 441.

129 Ibid., p. 451.

130 Ibid., p. 453.

> . . . martyrdom consists in that suffering of an annihilation which is a dying away from immediacy, consists in the opposition from the side of the divine itself against the existing individual, who is prevented from fully realizing the absolute relationship, a martyrdom, finally, which consists in his living in the world, with inwardness in his breast without having any expression for it.[131]

If the essential expression for existential pathos is suffering, the deepest expression for this suffering is when the individual, who passionately focuses his whole being upon his relationship to the Absolute, must accept that no external expression of his suffering, not even the conventional path of religious martyrdom, of abandoning his finite self and its preoccupations entirely, offers an adequate means to effecting that relationship. Thus, the "knight of hidden inwardness"[132] carries his martyrdom within himself, his unremarkable outward existence furnishing no clue to the passionate struggle within. Genuine martyrdom is this: to be thrust back irrevocably into the relativities of existence, to live out one's mundane, finite life, while always secretly laboring under the intense contradiction between this condition and one's ever-deepening inwardness.

The passionate adherence to this inward, suffering response to God, which finds no external counterpart, means that the truly religious exister lives "incognito." Although there may be many individuals who equally are "knights of hidden inwardness," this is of no aid or concern to him. He draws no comparison between himself and others because having "reflected himself out of every external relativity,"[133] he has thereby " . . . set up a screen between himself and other men, in order to safeguard and ensure the inwardness of his suffering and his God-relationship."[134] His incognito <u>is</u> the unexceptional, active life he shares with others in the world, but for him this finite order is no longer a realm in which he is firmly rooted: " . . . by severing every teleological relation to his

131 Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 453.

132 Ibid.

133 Ibid., p. 454.

134 Ibid., p. 452.

activity in the outward direction, and cutting off every resultant in the finite world," the exister "transforms his outward activity into an inward matter, inwardly before God."[135]

Isolated in inwardness before God, cut off from community with others, and utterly unable to use the finite medium to give expression to his condition, he occupies " . . . the very extremity of his subjectivity,"[136] and so becomes "absolutely engrossed with his God-relationship."[137] Yet, even when he has abandoned the solaces of finite existence and action, and penetrated the illusion that the strenuous exercise of freedom can effect a God-relationship, the individual does not now finally find rest and security. For precisely because he stands isolated before God, the exister suffers radically from that "fearful thing," his own annihilation. Though he "has the absolute conception present with him in his nothingness,"[138] this does not save him from suffering. Instead it throws him back absolutely upon himself, upon his own humanity--the deepest meaning of which is that between finite man and the Absolute God, there can be "no mutuality." Although he has acknowledged the nothingness of the whole world, and even of his own existence and freedom, in order to purify himself for the absolute relationship, the exister finds that he cannot slough off his involvement in the world, nor his finite personality and freedom. He must continue to lead a mundane life--a humbly human life, centered upon such trivia as enjoying an outing in the Deer Park[139]--even though, before God in inwardness, he has renounced these relativities, admitted their nothingness and his own impotence.

Caught in the contradiction between finite existence and the apprehension of the Absolute, the pathos of the religious exister is extreme. The uncertainty of religious self-consciousness is not eliminated even by the passion of this radical commitment, but

135 Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 452.

136 Ibid., p. 454.

137 Ibid.

138 Ibid., p. 432.

139 See ibid., pp. 422 ff.

rather reinforced. His existence as a secret sufferer engaged upon "action in inwardness" offers the individual no proof that now, at last, eternal happiness is assured. Even when he completely "humbles himself before God,"[140] makes of himself an outcast from the social and ethical orders, no individual can thereby be certain that he stands in a genuine God-relationship.[141]

The uncertainty and hiddenness of religious suffering are the paradoxical "expression" for the existing individual's God-relationship. This suffering expresses the finite subject's inability to effect a reconciliation between finitude and the infinite, between nature, human freedom, and the Divine Absolute. Suffering expresses the individual's existential knowledge of what it is to be a finite subject, because it is the appropriation of the self-contradictoriness of the human condition itself. Man's dual status as a being who has "reflected himself out of every external relativity," who exists in absolute inwardness, and yet is a humble captive of finite immediacy--this is the self-apprehension to which the exister, who in his quest for a God-relationship encounters "the reaction of the limit against the finite individual,"[142] is forced.

iii. The Decisive Expression: Guilt

All the movements of the religion of immanence (Religiousness A) reflect the intensifying efforts of the existing individual who--taking as his starting-point and his sole assumption "human nature in general"[143]--strives to fulfill the ethical task of becoming a fully concrete self, through achieving an absolute relationship to

[140] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 456.

[141] This is the significance of the plight of the patriarch Abraham, whose God-relationship is the subject of Fear and Trembling. Having abandoned all in the name of the God-relationship, Abraham stands isolated--suffering in fear and trembling the possibility that, after all, his suffering is an expression of fanatic willfulness and self-pride, and not a manifestation of the presence of the Absolute.

[142] Ibid., p. 410.

[143] Ibid., p. 496.

the Absolute. Within the religion of immanence, then, the exister never abandons the goal of realizing the God-relationship through his own unaided efforts. Indeed, even though the dialectic of Religion A is directed toward establishing an adequate God-relationship, this religious goal is nevertheless itself generated in and through the exister's primary ethical goal of becoming what he is. The movements of the dialectic, then, take place within the immanence of subjective existence, as part of the exister's attempt to comprehend and become himself:

> Religiousness A is the dialectic of inward transformation; it is the relation to an eternal happiness which is not conditioned by anything but is the dialectic inward appropriation of the relationship, and so is conditioned only by the inwardness of the appropriation and its dialectic.[144]

Each stage in this immanent dialectic thus involves a deepening of the subject's ethical inwardness, and a consequent enlargement of his self-knowledge. That this ethical self-becoming demands the exister's "complicity with God" is part of the unfolding of the implicit structure of finite existence, and not a demand imposed upon the individual from without.

We have seen, however, that every effort thus far made to accomplish this immanent self-transformation has merely accentuated the exister's alienation both from himself and from God. His own "eternal consciousness" notwithstanding, the inwardly self-transformed individual comes to recognize that if existential freedom generates the need for an absolute relationship to the Absolute, it is equally his own individual existence itself which prevents him from becoming eternal:

> The edifying element in the sphere of religiousness A is essentially that of immanence, it is the annihilation by which the individual puts himself out of the way in order to find God, since precisely the individual himself is the hindrance . . . the individual himself in his finiteness, in his obstinacy against God.[145]

[144] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 494. Religion A is exemplified, then, even in pagan cultures, which through dialectical reflection in immanence, can aspire to knowledge of and union with the "hidden God," but which have no access to the paradoxical "breach with immanence" which distinguishes Religion B (Christianity) from all such aspirations, and hence ultimately remain in a condition of alienation.

[145] Ibid., p. 497.

The religious exister thus becomes himself in a most ironic way; through recognizing the essential limits of the standpoint of immanence, which has the free individual for its sole presupposition, he realizes that his very existential freedom condemns him to suffering, to impotent self-diremption--yet, having freely appropriated this realization, he becomes more fully inward, more fully himself before God.

It might appear that at this point in the dialectic the drama of ethical self-discovery has reached its apotheosis--for surely here the finite subject, existing in religious inwardness, stands stripped of all his pretensions, experiencing and knowing himself as he truly is. But this is not so:

> Religiousness is indeed inwardness in existing, and everything which serves to deepen this determinant heightens the religiousness. . . . All interpretations of existence rank in accordance with the degree of the individual's apprehension of inwardness.[146]

Although the extreme pathos of religious existence is negatively expressed in suffering, the summit of passionate inwardness is broached only by the exister who consciously and freely chooses himself as responsible for this suffering existence. The individual who "fully reflects upon what it is to exist" cannot simply acquiesce in his condition of suffering self-annihilation; neither, unlike the religious ascetic, can he try to absolve himself from finitude through generating a "higher" form of suffering. Rather, the dialectic of Religiousness A finally "makes the thing of existing as strenuous as possible"[147] when it engages the suffering inwardness of the exister so totally as to extinguish all hope for deliverance from the harsh self-assessment implicit in the standpoint of religious suffering.

The title for this final, "decisive expression" of religious pathos is guilt:

> In the totality of guilt-consciousness, existence asserts itself as strongly as it can within immanence.[148]

146 Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 506.

147 Ibid., p. 509.

148 Ibid., p. 517.

If, in religious matters, the positive is always recognized by the negative, then the radical self-negation of the guilty exister becomes a higher indicator than suffering of the negative presence of God within existence. The individual who chooses himself as "always in the wrong" before God is not only sufferingly separated from the Absolute; he has freely appropriated that suffering selfhood as his own work. Through freedom, he has denounced and negated freedom itself; he has abandoned the hope that through "action in inwardness" he can somehow justify himself before God. Thus, the individual who "suffers guiltily"[149] has resisted "Anfechtung"; unlike the ascetic, he does not try to salvage something of his human dignity and worth, but fully shoulders the burden of himself. Where "the positive is recognizable by the negative" he who suffers guiltily stands in a clearer relationship to eternal happiness, even though the one who suffers through no fault of his own might, in conventional moral terms, be accorded a higher value.[150] This is because, in his very alienation and incapacity to act independently or righteously before God, the guilty individual more decisively experiences, hence expresses, what it is to be a concretely existing subject.

The dialectical pathos of Religion A advances the efforts of the ethical individual to realize himself--and yet, it does so by compelling the exister backward, toward a more concrete apprehension of his own existential inwardness:

> . . . guilt is treated as the decisive expression for the existential pathos, and with this the remoteness from the . . . [ethico-religious] task . . . [of self-realization] . . . is still greater, and yet not in such a way that the task is forgotten, but in such a way that the investigation . . . goes backward, plunging deeper into existence. . . . And yet this backward movement is a forward movement, in so far as going forward means going deeper into something . . . the more an individual in dealing with his task plunges into existence, the more he goes forward . . . so to recall the task back to a more concrete expression, means precisely a deeper absorption in existence.[151]

149 Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 475.

150 Ibid.

151 Ibid., pp. 468-469.

This is why the category of guilt now assumes such decisive significance for the exister. Guilt-consciousness is the ultimate stage within the sphere of religious immanence; the exister who chooses himself as guilty expresses, as concretely as is possible for a finite subject, what it is to be such a subject:

> . . . guilt is . . . the most concrete expression of existence . . . the expression for the strongest self-assertion of existence . . . .[152]

The guilty exister still affirms the ethical precept that to exist is to choose oneself in existence, even if this means the self-annihilative choice of oneself as guilty. And yet, through thus freely choosing himself as guilty, the individual thereby cuts himself off from the resources of ethical freedom. Having willed himself as totally guilty, he acknowledges the negative dialectic of resignation and suffering as his own responsibility, while recognizing that the result of this choice is the denial of the efficacy of all ethical self-assertion. Not only is the guilty exister a suffering, alienated individual--by freely appropriating this state of ontological isolation and self-diremption as the fruit of his own ethical activity, he becomes what he is. The ethical exister's task of becoming himself, through choosing himself absolutely, thus progresses to the stage of decisive expression when he becomes conscious of himself as freely existing in an absolute disrelationship with the Absolute.

Now from this it might appear that consciousness of guilt is an expression for the realization that the exister "is lost and the relationship is relinquished"[153]--but this would be to misunderstand the nature of the dialectic of immanent self-transformation. Through backward penetration into existence, the individual actualizes an absolute non-relation to God, and thus to himself. Yet, even at this point of absolute self-abandonment, of total guilt, the exister has not abandoned the ethical requirement to freely realize himself in inwardness before God. In fact, it is only because he continues to maintain the validity and urgency of the ethical ideal that he

152 Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 470. [Emphasis mine.]

153 Ibid.

suffers the guilty consciousness of being unable to fulfill his responsibility thereto. Assent to the ethical goal of achieving eternal happiness is a condition without which existential guilt cannot be sustained:

> The consciousness of guilt is the decisive expression for existential pathos in relation to an eternal happiness. As soon as one leaves out the eternal happiness, the consciousness of guilt also drops out essentially . . . .[154]

Thus, although the content of guilt-consciousness is radically negative, asserting the impossibility of an existentially-appropriated God-relationship, hence the impossibility of absolute self-synthesis, of eternal happiness, nevertheless the free maintenance, within temporal becoming, of this negative disrelationship, is now the form under which the exister expresses his continued and absolute commitment to the ethico-religious requirement.[155]

Guilt-consciousness is a category which appears entirely within

[154] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 474.

[155] The relation between religious guilt and ethical absolute ideals was of considerable interest to Nietzsche. While he agreed that guilt is a function of ethical self-consciousness, he would have opposed Kierkegaard's claim that this guilt-awareness is an expression of authentic existence. Rather, he argues, it is yet another cunning ploy, on the part of arrogant individuality, to elevate itself, as abstract, isolated inwardness, above the conditions of finite existence. Thus, it is ultimately with the very notion of the finite subject as a unitary self-consciousness, vainly yet resolutely seeking self-certainty through gaining power over the temporal, finite aspects of existence, that Nietzsche takes issue. He suggests, instead, that guilt, as a perversion of genuine selfhood, can only be overcome by refusing to leap beyond the conditions of existence, but rather embracing them joyously as one's very reality. His notion of "das unschuld des Werdens" (the "innocence of becoming") implies the dissolution of the fixed, unity-seeking, infinitely-inward ego--and its corresponding ideal of Eternal, Absolute Truth--and an immersion in the flux of temporal becoming, as the most humanly appropriate response to existential guilt and its foundations in otherworldly absolute ideals. This theme--i.e., that an insistence upon a unitary self-consciousness does not adequately express the being-in-the-world of the finite subject--recurs in later existential phenomenology. For instance, one finds echoes of Nietzsche's view that any finite individual has "many selves" in Sartre's phenomenological essay, The Transcendence of the Ego, and in all those existential phenomenologists (even the later Husserl) for whom the subject's concrete immersion in the life-world is more reflective of what it is to exist, than any stress upon a Cartesian detached and unitary ego.

the sphere of religious immanence. The guilty exister remains occupied with the ethico-religious task of self-transformation; his guilt, therefore, is a function of, and response to, his understanding appropriation of himself as one who both aspires to eternal happiness, and yet, because his is a freedom-within-finitude, fails to achieve it. Even though he has purified and deepened his apprehension of himself as an exister to the point where he realizes that it is indeed this very existential freedom which prevents him from rising to a God-relationship, the guilty individual cannot abandon this freedom, because he recognizes it as his essential self, that self which it is his ethical obligation fully to actualize.

Guilt-consciousness, then, is neither the final negation nor even the transcendence, through some form of mediation, of the ethical ideal of free self-realization, but rather its highest expression. Guilt expresses, as concretely, as decisively as is possible for the exister, what it means to be a finite subject: it is the " . . . strongest <u>self</u>-assertion of existence . . .,"[156] and not the abandonment of the standpoint of ethical freedom. To be an existing subject <u>is</u> to be free--but, in order to <u>be</u> free, an <u>existing</u> individual must <u>become</u> free, and this means that he must choose himself as guilty: " . . . only when I choose myself as guilty do I choose myself absolutely . . . ."[157] The guilt-conscious individual, who has chosen himself absolutely, clearly has not despairingly lost himself, nor abandoned his task of self-becoming:

> In the consciousness of guilt it is the selfsame subject which becomes essentially guilty by keeping guilt in relationship to an eternal happiness . . . .[158]

This exister--who has assumed the burden of his freedom, and so <u>become</u> free, i.e., become himself--does not, then, blame his self-alienated condition upon the ontological structure of existence. Rather, he recognizes that, as finite subjectivity, he <u>is</u> in the mode of becoming, and that hence he must acknowledge, and continuously

156 Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 470.

157 Kierkegaard, <u>Either/Or</u>, II, p. 221.

158 Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 474.

reaffirm himself, as responsible for his existential plight. Through the "eternal recollection of guilt,"[159] he freely sustains inwardness in existing--"the disrelationship which is the expression for the relationship."[160] Thus, guilt is not simply a burden, to which the passively suffering exister is condemned, but the highest, albeit the most negative, expression of existential freedom:

> Call this recollection of guilt a fetter, and say it is never taken off the prisoner, and you indicate only the one side of it, for the thought most closely associated with the fetter is deprivation of freedom . . . .[161]

For although the exister who maintains the continuous consciousness of guilt "never gets out of harness," he is still, nevertheless, "related to an eternal happiness"[162]--the pathos of total guilt-consciousness being in fact the most decisive, because the most free, expression of this. Guilt is not the expression of an "absolute breach"[163] between the exister and eternal happiness, a breach which would be the occasion for despair, rather than for continued ethical action. Although guilt-consciousness never lifts the exister out of the fetters of existence, but only confirms his suffering disrelation to the Absolute, nevertheless

> . . . the consciousness of guilt is a higher expression of this than suffering. And in the suffering of guilt-consciousness, guilt at once assuages and rankles. It assuages because it is an expression of freedom as this is found in the ethico-religious sphere, where the positive is recognizable by the negative, freedom by guilt . . . .[164]

Total guilt-consciousness is the dialectical successor to religious suffering, then, because it decisively expresses the radical disjunction between the free, temporal individual and the Absolute, while simultaneously maintaining the absolute need of the ethically

159 Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 475.

160 Ibid., p. 473.

161 Ibid., p. 475.

162 Ibid., p. 473.

163 Ibid.

164 Ibid., p. 475.

committed exister for self-realization through an "absolute relation to the Absolute." And just as suffering could not be reduced to the external, finite circumstances of fortune and misfortune, neither can religious guilt be quantified or determined empirically. Such guilt is no finite response to a particular, morally culpable action, and so cannot be alleviated through punishment or penance. Just as suffering is "action in inwardness," so is guilt the decisive, essentially inward consciousness of oneself as freedom, existing in absolute disrelation to the Absolute. Any effort to absolve oneself from this total guilt through external action merely finitizes the guilt, hence trivializing the exister's absolute choice of himself before God. Every effort to mediate between the guilty exister and the divine

> . . . dispenses man from absorbing himself in determinants of totality . . . for the solution of mediation . . . is that the outward is the inward and the inward is the outward, whereby the absolute relationship of the individual to the absolute is abolished.[165]

Like the attempt to mediate suffering, through comparing the trials of one individual with those of his fellows, the remission of guilt, through punishments or penance inflicted by the church, the state, or even oneself, involves a confusion of "some lower conception of guilt" with " . . . the totality of guilt" which " . . . comes into being for the individual when he puts his guilt together with the relation to an eternal happiness."[166]

Such attempts at mediation merely externalize what is essentially inward, and even more important, relativize what is intended as the absolute expression for the relation of the existing individual to God. Mediation undermines the absolute exclusivity of the exister's consciousness of religious guilt, its essential indifference to the evaluative judgments made on his behalf by other men:

> But the absolute relationship is absolute precisely for the fact that one possesses it as one's own by relating oneself to the absolute, as a jewel which can be possessed as a whole and cannot be parceled out in small change.[167]

165 Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 481.

166 Ibid.

167 Ibid. [Emphasis mine.]

The movements of religious immanence have all been governed by this requirement that the exister freely relate himself, precisely as an exister, and abandoning nothing of his unique inwardness, to the Absolute. His deepest concern has thus been essentially two-fold--on the one hand, to understand and choose himself, and then freely to bring himself into absolute relationship with God.

But although in assuming the consciousness of total guilt, the finite exister appears to have realized the ethical goal of choosing himself absolutely, the fruits of his success are profoundly disturbing. The ethical individual embarked upon his task of self-realization in the naive confidence that freedom--the "true wonderful lamp" would "bring God into being for him," and thus heal the rifts in finite existence. It is now apparent, however, that while existential freedom defines and animates ethical inwardness, yet it is equally this capacity for infinite self-becoming which radically separates the finite exister and the Absolute. Thus, precisely insofar as the finite subject becomes himself, just so far does he stand in an absolute disrelationship with the Absolute. And yet, the exister is certain that unless he can become one with God without abandoning himself and his freedom, he will fail absolutely to realize himself.

And yet, as we have seen, " . . . the eternal recollection of guilt which characterizes hidden inwardness is anything but despair . . . ."[168] For despite the absolute negativity of the exister's condition, nevertheless the perpetuation of guilt-consciousness indicates that he continues to regard himself as a free individual, continues to value absolutely the ethical quest for eternal happiness. The steady maintenance of guilt is then

> . . . a mark indicative of the relationship to an eternal happiness, a mark which is as far as possible from being a plain indication, but which is always sufficient to prevent the leaping aside of despair.[169]

Precisely in striving to maintain within inwardness the consciousness of total guilt, the exister expresses his unremitting adherence

[168] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 492.

[169] Ibid., pp. 492-493.

to the ethical ideal, rather than despair over it. The radical pathos of this self-negating standpoint, wherein the subject is most decisively himself, constitutes a unique occasion for actualizing that ethical ideal, even though its fulfillment must involve a paradoxical breach with immanence.

Only when the exister has reached the absolute limits of the ethical quest for self-certainty through free self-transformation does it become meaningful, hence possible, for him to seek the realization of that ideal in a source beyond himself. The pathetic self-understanding of Religiousness A must first be present in the individual before there can be any question of becoming aware of the dialectic of Religiousness B--of Christianity, the "paradoxical breach with immanence." This state of religious pathos, while "always sufficient to prevent the leaping aside of despair,"[170] is, however, no guarantee that the guilt-consciousness and self-diremption of finite existence will be healed. Nevertheless, pursuit of the dialectical pathos of inward self-transformation is the sole adequate propaedeutic for the decisiveness of the leap of faith:

> One does not prepare onself to come to Christianity by reading books or by world-historical surveys, but by immersing oneself deeper in existence.[171]

The essential consciousness of guilt is the expression for the religious individual's deepest backward absorption into existence. Therefore it is not the expression of a despairing consciousness of religious isolation, but rather the essential condition of the possibility of that faith which alone Kierkegaard refers to as the "category of despair":

> . . . when the eternal happiness as the absolute telos has become for him absolutely the only comfort, and when accordingly his relationship to it is reduced to its minimum through the attainment of existential depth, by reason of the fact that guilt-consciousness is the repelling relationship and would constantly take this telos away from him, and yet this minimum and this possibility are absolutely more than everything else to him, then is the appropriate time to begin with the dialectical. When he is in this situation it will arouse in him a still higher pathos.[172]

170 Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 492. [Emphasis mine.]

171 Ibid., p. 497.

172 Ibid.

If "the individual becomes infinite only by virtue of making the absolute venture"[173] which is the leap of faith, he must, says Kierkegaard, "have room to move, so to speak."[174] The existing individual is most fully himself, when he is most profoundly aware of himself as a free, isolated self, standing as "nothing before God." The radical pathos of his condition, expressing as it does an "intervening yawning chasm"[175] between the human and the Divine, makes ample room for "the transition and its decisiveness . . . a suitable scene for the infinite passion of the individual"[176] who would realize himself through faith:

> But the largest space I can obtain, where there is room for the most vehement gesture of the passion that embraces the infinite, is uncertainty of knowledge with respect to an eternal happiness, or the certain knowledge that the choice in the finite sense is a piece of madness; now there is room, now you can venture![177]

Guilt-consciousness, then, is the decisive expression for ethico-religious pathos because it alone generates that extreme uncertainty regarding the ethico-religious ideal, which makes possible the radical decision of the leap of faith. It is at that point where the ethical exister is conscious of guilt, and so is most profoundly uncertain of himself, that he is most free. As free, he is most fully himself, and by that very fact, most fully other than the Absolute. But, it is only because he has thus become decisively himself, through free "reflection in immanence," that he can now be in a position to commit himself to the "absolute venture and the absolute risk"[178]--the risk of losing himself, his very freedom as an ethically-existing individual, in the interest of realizing that selfhood through faith in the possibility and actuality of the Absolute Paradox.

[173] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 379.

[174] Ibid., p. 381.

[175] Ibid., p. 379.

[176] Ibid.

[177] Ibid., pp. 381-382.

[178] Ibid., p. 384.

Chapter Eight

Faith and Subjectivity

1. Immanence and the Possibility of Faith

> We have to recognize the truth which is involved in the modern view, namely, that God is not to be considered apart from the subjective spirit . . . .[1]

Both Hegel and his critic Kierkegaard recognized that with the rise of the modern consciousness of subjective freedom no attempt to comprehend the significance of God for human existence could ignore the paramount importance of the principle of subjectivity in matters of faith. While "In the Middle Ages . . . it was the essential Being of God that was principally considered and defined . . ." such that " . . . the relation of God to man . . . did not appear to form an essential part of the doctrine . . .,"[2] post-Cartesian thought, based as it is upon the pursuit of insights arising out of the primacy of the Cogito, had to approach the question of God in the light of its awareness of the mediating role of subjective consciousness in all matters of knowledge and action. Thus, traditional doctrines regarding the objective, substantial nature of the Divine had at the very least to be supplemented by a consideration of the relationship of the self-consciously free subject to the content of belief. The place--if any--of religious faith in the search for truth demanded reexamination, once the primary epistemological importance of subjectivity was acknowledged.

Both Hegel and Kierkegaard undertook precisely such a reexamination. But, while Hegel saw the mediating function of subjective

[1] G. W. F. Hegel, Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion, trans., E. B. Speirs and J. Burdon Sanderson (New York: The Humanities Press, 1962; rpt. 1974), Vol. I, p. 101.

[2] Ibid. [Emphasis mine.]

spirit as intrinsically related to the development of a substantial doctrine regarding the nature of God--and indeed regarding the divine/human relationship itself--Kierkegaard insisted that the Hegelian effort to mediate substance and subjectivity represented a profound perversion of the true implications of recognizing the centrality of subjectivity, and particularly led to a dangerous misconception of the role of faith in human existence. Echoing Kant, Kierkegaard affirms a radical distinction between the human and the divine: man, he insists, is incapable of approaching God through thinking, but is thrust always back upon his finitude, from which standpoint God can only appear as a limiting principle, the infinitely unknowable. To exist as free yet finite subjectivity is to stand over against the otherness of the Absolute--the existing individual indeed apprehends and defines himself as an individual, i.e., becomes himself, in and through a process of self-differentiation from nature and from God. The pursuit of self-knowledge, then, leads the existing subject along paths of ever-deepening inwardness; rather than lifting him beyond the strictures of time and finitude, it affirms them. The subject's quest for truth thus culminates not in a self-differentiating unity with the Absolute--as is the case in Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit--but in the stark realization that the finite subject becomes himself precisely through accepting responsibility for his own irremediable alienation from the Divine. The freedom of the finite subject is thus identical with his radical isolation from the Infinite.[3]

Yet, like Hegel's finite spirit, Kierkegaard's religious exister nevertheless clings to the ideal of self-reconciliation through union with the Absolute. Disillusioned with the possibility that either reflection or ethical freedom can achieve his ideal, this

[3] In this respect, Kierkegaard represents an extreme development of the Kantian separation between the finite and infinite. While, for Kant, the finite subject could at least think the "Idea of God" as necessary for the completion of rational freedom, Kierkegaard regards even such an attenuated "relationship" between the human and divine as inimical to the genuine realization of finite selfhood and destructive of a true appreciation of the Divine Infinitude. Thus, for Kierkegaard, the term "paradox" characterizes both the reality of God himself and the relationship of the existing individual (for whom, now, God is not even thinkable) to the Divine.

religious exister continues to maintain the validity of the ethical goal of self-realization--i.e., he continues to affirm the truth of subjectivity. But how can this subjective truth ever now be actualized? Although the guilt-conscious individual persists in his ethical striving, he does so with the full awareness of the futility of his efforts, so that while he has now decisively chosen himself, and so knows himself as radically free, the price of this self-realization is permanent alienation. The bitter certainty to which the ethical quest has led is the certainty of the exister's free self-diremption and his infinite distance from God.

Nevertheless, it is only now, when through dialectical penetration of the illusions surrounding finite existence, the individual chooses and understands himself as eternally unhappy, that it at last becomes genuinely possible for the exister to fulfill his ethical task. This highest existential possibility can be actualized, however, only if the standpoint of ethico-religious immanence--with its presupposition that self-transformation is the responsibility and prerogative of the inwardly-existing subject--gives way before faith in the unifying power of the Christian paradox:

> Religiousness A must first be present in the individual before there can be any question of becoming aware of the dialectic of B. When the individual is related to an eternal happiness by the most decisive expression of the existential pathos, then there can be question of becoming aware how the dialectic in the second instance thrusts a man down into the pathos of the absurd.[4]

Thus, the truth of the pathos achieved in Religiousness A is its function as a propaedeutic toward that intense inwardness which paradoxical faith in the Absurd alone engenders.

Because it ultimately "discounts existence,"[5] speculative philosophy views the religion of immanence as higher than Christianity--indeed, it sees Christianity as a dialectical stage in the development of immanent self-knowledge. This is because, says Kierkegaard, in common with paganism, speculative thinkers take "human nature in general"[6] as their sole assumption, and take for

[4] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 494.

[5] Ibid., p. 506.

[6] Ibid., p. 496.

granted an essential connection between the human and the divine. In contrast to the more modest aspirations of pagan philosophy, however, speculative thought holds that reflection upon the universal categories of experience, when sufficiently thorough, can grasp the nature of the divine/human relationship. From the standpoint of immanence, there appears to be an a priori, internal bond between the self-alienated, finite individual and the Infinite, such that, if the speculative thinker diligently probes the immanent structure of human existence, he can "recollect himself" back into this pregiven unity with the divine. Speculative thought assumes that there can be no absolute difference between finite and infinite, between man and God, and so undermines the unique inwardness of subjective existence.

"Because it refuses to understand that subjectivity is truth,"[7] speculative philosophy fails to understand that the sole appropriate consequence of pursuing truth through immanent reflection is the recognition that this approach to self-understanding can only serve as a negative precondition to realizing genuine selfhood. For the very nature of the finite existing subject belies the immanentist solution to the problem of self-alienation. Even when the ethical individual pursues selfhood through reflecting in immanence upon what it means to exist, he does not find rest in knowledge of himself as an essential moment within the all-comprehensive Absolute. By encouraging the individual to "take refuge in the immanent,"[8] speculative thought only joins hands with "pagan reminiscence," in viewing the individual as a moment, or even a mere appearance, within the overarching totality of the Infinitely Real. But, as the tortured dialectic of Religiousness A shows, the attempt to become oneself through existing in a God-relationship leads finally to guilt-consciousness--to the exister's free acknowledgment of his impotence to effect ethical self-realization, and the accompanying

[7] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 194. Comparing speculative thought and Christian faith, Kierkegaard comments that while "philosophy teaches that the way is to become objective," Christianity teaches that "the way is to become subjective, i.e., to become a subject in truth" (ibid., p. 117).

[8] Ibid, p. 194.

realization that in accepting this self-alienated status, his "existence asserts itself as strongly as it can within immanence."[9] Thus, the exister who stands at the extreme limits of immanent self-reflection both actualizes and annihilates himself in one existential act.

Through pursuing the ideal of immanent self-transformation the finite exister discovers that his very temporality, his finitude, prevents him from ever actualizing himself as one with the Infinite:

> In [Religiousness] A, the fact of my existing, my existence . . . is thus a lowlier thing, which prevents me from being the infinitely higher thing I am.[10]

The exister within Religiousness A acts on the assumption that he is essentially at least potentially one with the Infinite. This assumption, and the ensuing attempt to realize this bond within existence, accounts for the inwardness shared by pagan thinkers and modern, ethically-inward individuals. Such an exister "discovers in time that he must assume he is eternal"[11]--and the tension which fuels the dialectic of Religion A is the contradiction between this assumption and the actuality of temporal experience: "In time the individual recollects that he is eternal. The contradiction lies exclusively within immanence."[12] The exister in Religion A assumes that he is potentially eternal, and that through freedom, he can become what he is--i.e., can "choose himself as absolute, absolutely" through realizing a God-relationship. The negative insight to which passionate commitment to the ideal of Religion A finally leads, however, is that human freedom alone is not sufficient to fulfill the ethical requirement. The exister who affirms as his initial assumption an immanent bond between finite subjectivity and eternal Being comes to see that this assumption is self-contradictory--that, indeed,

[9] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 517.

[10] Ibid., p. 508.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid. This is the situation, for instance, of Socrates, whom Kierkegaard reveres as a paradigm of the highest inwardness which can be achieved within immanence, but which nevertheless is merely an analogue for the absolute inwardness of Christian faith.

it is the final illusion from which authentic existence must liberate itself.

But if the possibility of self-liberation has now been recognized as a futile ideal, if existence itself has been seen to be what prevents the finite subject from being "the infinitely higher thing" that he truly is, then how can the needed self-synthesis be achieved? The answer, for Kierkegaard, is through faith--a faith which does not leave existence behind, but which rather, through radically affirming the truth of that very existential inwardness which precludes union with the divine, enables the believer to achieve what the dialectic of immanent self-reflection has pronounced impossible. "This is the fight of faith, which fights madly (if one would so express it) for possibility."[13]

The possibility of faith thus stands as the ultimate existential possibility. This faith is analogous to, but infinitely higher than, the (Socratic) faith in the ultimate rational integrity of thought and being, of existence and eternity, which constitutes the most intense expression of pagan inwardness. Unlike Socratic faith, which represents the persistence of hope in the face of the realization that existence separates man from the Eternal Truth, the faith of Religiousness B (Christianity) emerges only out of the ruins of all purely human hopes. The paradox of Christian faith is that, despite its negative foundation in loss of selfhood, it alone enables the finite exister to achieve absolute intensification of inwardness, and so fully to become himself. This becomes possible through asserting one's faith in the absurd claim that the eternal God entered time, and that through a radically free, unnecessitated act, arising entirely outside the sphere of immanence, the immanent ideal of individual self-realization through a God-relationship, i.e., eternal happiness, becomes paradoxically possible. Thus, the supreme existential possibility for a finite exister is freely to affirm the possibility, through divine power, of realizing the rationally impossible goal of self-integration:

[13] Kierkegaard, The Sickness Unto Death, pp. 171-172; hereafter cited as SUD.

> The decisive thing is, that for God all things are possible . . . but the decisive affirmation comes only when man is brought to the utmost extremity, so that humanly speaking no possibility exists. Then the question is whether he will believe that for God all things are possible. . . . But this is completely the formula for losing one's mind or understanding: to believe is precisely to lose one's understanding in order to win God.[14]
>
> The believer possesses the eternally certain antidote for despair, viz. possibility. . . . This is the sound health of faith which resolves contradictions. The contradiction is in this case that, humanly speaking, destruction is certain, and that nevertheless there is possibility.[15]

2. Sin-Consciousness: The "Potentiation of Despair"

Although the leap of faith thus constitutes a decisive breach with the ideal of an immanent, rationally comprehensible self-realization, it is clear that the believer who confronts the possibility of the leap does not depart from his commitment to this ethical goal. Indeed, it is the committed exister's (i.e., the subjective thinker's) pathetic striving to establish the truth of subjectivity through immanent self-reflection which provides both the motive and the springboard from which the leap of faith can take rise. Before the religious individual can appreciate the import of Christianity as an "existence communication,"[16] directed not at satisfying his intellect, but rather at maintaining and healing his finite existence itself, he must acknowledge and express the futility of all merely doctrinal, (objective) wisdom, and the hopelessness even of the subjective thinker's existential efforts to render the finite and infinite commensurable. In other words, before he can grasp genuine freedom, he must encounter genuine despair. The deepest value of the ethico-religious dialectic of Religiousness A is not that it can save the exister from despair, but rather that it makes

[14] Kierkegaard, SUD, p. 171.

[15] Ibid., p. 173.

[16] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 499.

the experience of such genuine despair possible for the first time, and so opens the way for faith, the "category of despair."

> The difficulty [with a pathetic striving based solely within immanent self-reflection] is that the ethical self is supposed to be found immanently in the despair, so that the individual by persisting in despair at last wins himself. He has indeed used a determination of freedom: to choose himself, which seems to lessen the difficulty . . . . But this avails nothing. When I despair, I use myself to despair, and therefore I can indeed by myself despair of everything; but when I do this I cannot by myself come back. In this moment it is that the individual needs divine assistance, while it is quite right to say that one must first have understood the existential relationship between the aesthetic and the ethical in order to be at this point; that is to say, by being there in passion and inwardness one doubtless becomes aware of the religious--of the leap.[17]

Although guilt-consciousness carries the exister to the pinnacle of religious immanence, so that he comes to experience himself as an unhappy, divided consciousness, cut off by existing itself from union with the Infinite, the guilty exister has nevertheless not yet precipitated total despair--and so has not achieved an inwardness sufficient to impel him toward faith as his sole redemptive possibility. For the unhappiness connected with guilt retains a trace of hope. The guilty exister affirms his guilt as the "decisive expression" of temporal freedom; thus, he can only rid himself of guilt by abandoning freedom itself. This he cannot do, however, since every attempt to annihilate himself merely reaffirms existence as temporally enacted freedom. The guilty exister can only persist in his ethical striving, in the hope that through this courageously self-aware exercise of that very faculty which alienates him from the Absolute, he can nevertheless, at least in some ideal sense, promote a state of ethical virtue. For the exister who apprehends that subjectivity is truth, the sheer expression of freedom itself, despite its negative results, retains a positive existential value. For although the guilty subject exists in a state of self-division and alienation from God, his very guilt itself constitutes an affirmation of finite existence as a condition of some merit. His disrelation from God is, after all,

[17] Kierkegaard, CUP, pp. 230-231.

a form of relation, to which he himself gives concrete, ethically-inward expression.

Guilt-consciousness, then, is not that apotheosis of despair which makes possible the leap to Christianity. Yet, this "last enthusiastic in which the finite spirit appeals to God, within the sphere of freedom . . ."[18] is a vital dialectical stage on the path to specifically Christian inwardness. Since guilt constitutes the most strenuous immanent expression of the truth of subjective inwardness, then the level of self-awareness reached through the appropriation of guilt is extreme. And, if "despair is potentiated in proportion to consciousness of self,"[19] then the depth of the guilty exister's despair is great. However, that despair is by no means absolute, as long as the individual clings to the hope that he can, "by persisting in his despair . . . at last win himself."

But is any further intensification of inwardness--any further articulation of the individual's existential isolation before God--even possible? Is not the guilt-consciousness of the finite subject, struggling to effect an impossible ideal, the most radical accentuation of subjective existence conceivable? Only, says Kierkegaard, if all the categories used to illuminate the truth of subjective existence must themselves be derivable solely within immanence, both products and measures of "natural man's" efforts at absolute self-realization. This was in fact the final condition attainable for pagan consciousness, where the level of selfness reached by the exister "was not nearly so 'qualified' as that of Christendom."[20] The despair of the inwardly existing pagan could not be radically accentuated because his ethical activity was sustained by hope in the humanistic ideal of the perfectibility of man through virtuous action within immanence: " . . . the pagan and the natural man have as their measure the merely human self."[21] In this regard, modern speculative thought, says Kierkegaard, actually

[18] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 239.

[19] Kierkegaard, SUD, p. 211.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid., pp. 211-212.

perpetrates a return to paganism, rather than a philosophical advance upon Christianity, because it seeks, through thought, to mediate the finite and infinite, and hence to revoke that radical despair over the natural perfectibility of finite existence which uniquely conditions the development of Christian self-consciousness.

In the context of a purely immanentist ontology, whether it be pagan or speculative, no radical accentuation of finite subjectivity can occur. Even the heights achieved by the exister in Religion A cannot fully express the radical difference between God and the finite individual, because he still understands the nothingness of the individual before God in terms of the failure of persistent ethical striving to approach the Absolute. Thus, even though he sees human freedom as powerless finally to effect the needed synthesis, he nevertheless continues to value existential freedom as at least the source of a negative relation through disrelation with the divine. But, if the authentic finitude of the existing subject is to be truly expressed, even this negative mode of relation must be severed--something, however, which no amount of further ethical action within immanence can bring about.

Therefore, the exister who genuinely seeks to realize the absolute telos, to become an absolutely concrete individual before God, must freely will a "teleological suspension of the ethical,"[22] such that "The ethical will then be present every moment with its infinite requirement, but the individual is not capable of realizing this requirement."[23] This may appear at first sight as simply another articulation of that "qualified despair"[24] experienced by the guilt-conscious exister. However, it involves the decisive appropriation, by such an ethically-inward individual, of the radical implications of the failure of ethical freedom, and so the assertion of a heightened degree of inwardness before God:

> The impotence of the individual must not be understood as the imperfection of a persistent striving toward the attainment of an ideal; for in that case no suspension is

[22] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 238.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Kierkegaard, SUD, p. 208.

> posited. . . . The suspension in question consists in the individual's finding himself in a state precisely the opposite of that which the ethical requires, so that far from being able to begin, each moment he remains in this state he is more and more prevented from beginning. He is not related to the task as possibility to actuality, but as impossibility.[25]

If the exister is truly to express the absolute difference between himself and the Divine--i.e., to relate to the ethical as an impossibility--he must absolutely negate even the indirect value of ethical striving, and yet continue to stand under the ethical requirement of choosing himself in relation to God. In such a condition, the exister is both separated from the divine, and is further in absolute conflict with his own immanent ethical ideal.

The truth of individual existence is thus now not simply emphasized through infinite ethical striving, but is paradoxically accentuated, through the realization that, before God, the truth of subjectivity can only be that subjectivity is untruth! Only when the exister abandons the image of himself as a free individual, who can expiate his existential guilt through ethical striving, and despairingly acknowledges himself as a being who is impotent to effect even a negative God-relationship, is the truth of subjective existence fully expressed. The finite individual absolutely potentiates himself in existence, then, when he willingly suspends all connection between himself and the world of immanent ethical activity, relinquishing all claims to continuity (even through dis-relation) with the Absolute:

> It is impossible to express with more intensive inwardness the principle that subjectivity is truth, than when subjectivity is in the first instance untruth, but yet subjectivity is the truth.[26]

The category which expresses this paradoxical claim that the truth of subjective existence is its untruth--i.e., its absolute self-diremption, its utter isolation before God and its incapacity to realize itself as a unity of finite and infinite, as eternally happy--is sin-consciousness:

[25] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 238.

[26] Ibid., p. 191.

> Let us now call the untruth of the individual sin.[27]
>
> The inwardness of sin . . . is the greatest possible and most painful possible distance from the truth, when truth is subjectivity.[28]

The self-alienation and isolation from God (the Eternal Truth) which is the truth of subjectivity, is most intensively experienced when the exister chooses himself as a sinner. The sinful individual, and the guilt-conscious one, share a recognition of their extreme difference from God. But in guilt-consciousness the individual retains hope, through asserting an indirect continuity with the divine. The sinful exister, on the other hand, fully appropriates the knowledge of his ontological status, and so acknowledges that the truth of subjectivity is its untruth. This despairing realization constitutes a break with immanence--a break, however, whereby the finite individual becomes most fully inward, most decisively himself:

> This paradoxical inwardness is the greatest possible, for even the most paradoxical determinant, if after all it is within immanence, leaves as it were a possibility of escape, of a leaping away, of a retreat into the eternal behind it. . . . But the breach makes the inwardness the greatest possible.[29]
>
> The paradoxical religiousness breaks with immanence and makes the fact of existing the absolute contradiction.[30]

As that category which enables the finite subject to become most fully aware of himself in his truth, sin-consciousness is the ultimate "potentiation of despair."[31] In contrast to the exister in Religion A, who acknowledges the bond between existential freedom and guilt, but who nevertheless retains faith in freedom as an

[27] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 186.

[28] Ibid., p. 240.

[29] Ibid., p. 507.

[30] Ibid. Kierkegaard sharply opposes this "break with immanence," and the speculative ideal of divine/human mediation. E.g., "Christianity . . . begins with the doctrine of sin. The category of sin is the category of the individual. . . . [Whereas] speculatively, one has to look away from the individual. So it is only frivolously one can talk speculatively about sin. The dialectic of sin is directly contrary to that of speculation." (SUD, pp. 250-251).

[31] Kierkegaard, SUD, p. 208.

instrument of self-redemption, the sin-conscious individual fully appropriates the consequences of his freedom-within-finitude. By "paradoxically accentuating" the pathos of the contradictions generated within religious immanence, he accepts and articulates the absolute gulf between man and God.

But having now chosen himself into a state of unredeemed, hence genuine, despair, the exister for the first time stands open to the possibility of genuine self-realization. Struggle as he might, the guilt-conscious individual could never achieve self-synthesis; indeed, it is of the very essence of ethical striving to remain tied to a temporally elusive ideal. Thus, for instance, even that most remarkable, inwardly-existing of pagans, Socrates, could only struggle to express human nature as adequately as is possible within immanence. But such individuals do not paradoxically accentuate existence, do not render existence decisively inward, do not express the absolute difference between the finite and the infinite--and so cannot experience that despair which alone potentiates the supreme existential decision, the decision of Christian faith:

> Just as the conception of God develops from the human spirit through its relation to itself and to the world, so the conception of Christ develops through the consciousness of sin. This, more than the historical revelation, was what paganism lacked.[32]

3. Christian Faith: The Will to Paradox

> In seeking to transcend itself lyrically, thought wills the discovery of the paradoxical. . . . The last thing that human thinking can do is to will to transcend itself in the paradoxical--and Christianity is precisely the paradoxical.[33]

[32] Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers, Vol. IV, trans. and ed., Edna Hong and Howard Hong (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1975), p. 106, #4006; hereafter cited as SKJP. "For this reason only Christianity is the absolute religion, because it conceives of men as sinners, for no other distinction can in this way recognize man in his difference from God." SKJP, I, p. 19, #46.

[33] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 95.

We have seen that the ideal of ethical self-transformation requires the exister to establish an absolute relationship to the Absolute, to the Eternal Truth as such. Yet, in pursuit of this goal, the ethical subject forges a dialectic of ever-deepening internal contradiction, precipitated by the difficulty of adequately expressing that absolute difference between the finite exister and the divine, which would alone place the ethical individual in an appropriately decisive relationship to the Absolute. In the interest of fully understanding and expressing the truth of finite subjectivity, the individual realizes the nullity of every human means for freely effecting the needed God-relationship, hence of every possibility for independently achieving the self-synthesis which is his primary goal. This negative movement of self-differentiation from the Absolute culminates in the paradoxical accentuation of finite existence as sinful.

When Kierkegaard points out that the opposite of sin is not virtue, but faith,[34] he is indicating that, in assuming the status of sinner, the exister breaks radically with the dialectic of immanent self-choice/self-reflection (Religiousness A), with its presupposition that the truth of subjectivity can be brought to concrete expression through an ever "deeper absorption in existence."[35] Thus, the individual who despairingly abandons immanence is not merely admitting that infinite, abstract reflection cannot help him to achieve a God-relationship; nor is he turning toward an arbitrary, subjective faith to supplant objective understanding as the mode of authentic self-realization. The movements of Religiousness A, which are the propaedeutic to the Absolute Paradox of Christianity, are <u>already</u> responses to the need, experienced by an ethically-inward individual, to fulfill the contradictory demands imposed upon him by the conditions of existence itself:

> All existential problems are passionate problems, for when existence is interpenetrated with reflection it generates passion. To think about existential problems in such a way as to leave out the passion, is tantamount to not thinking about them at all . . . .[36]

[34] Kierkegaard, SUD, p. 213.

[35] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 469.

[36] Ibid., p. 313.

Such an exister, then, is always a thinker--indeed, he thinks particularly at moments of existential passion, because the passion is aroused by the contradictory effort to think within the confines of temporal becoming:

> Abstract thought is wont to speak of contradiction, and of its immanent propulsive power, although by abstracting from existence and from existing it removes the difficulty and the contradiction. The subjective thinker is an existing individual and a thinker at one and the same time; he does not abstract from the contradiction and from existence, but lives in it while at the same time thinking. In all his thinking, therefore, he has to think the fact that he is an existing individual.[37]

Hence, when the individual negates the power of thought in the leap of faith, that thought cannot be identified with either an abstractly reflective understanding, or with a speculative, dialectical reason. The ethically-inward exister of Religiousness A is already an individual who affirms that only as an existential unity of subjective passion and reflective understanding can he approach the task of existing. Thus, he is a thinker--but a subjective thinker, who recognizes the contradictions inherent in finite existence, and yet struggles to hold existence and thought together in concrete unity:

> The subjective thinker is a dialectician dealing with the existential, and he has the passion of thought requisite for holding fast to the qualitative disjunction.[38]

This subjective dialectician, who "has the task of understanding himself in existence,"[39] discovers, however, that his task cannot be achieved within the limits he has set for himself--i.e., the limits of subjective, existential self-reflection. Thus, at the extremity of the immanent, subjectively reflective absorption in existence which is Religiousness A, he finds himself in a paradoxical position. If, as an existing thinker, he wishes to attain concreteness through "bringing the existential categories into relationship with one another,"[40] he must give up his ethical striving to achieve self-understanding through a subjective dialectic of deepening inwardness,

[37] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 314.

[38] Ibid., p. 313.

[39] Ibid., p. 314.

[40] Ibid., p. 320.

and choose himself as a sinner. But further, as a sinner, he must posit, as the doubly paradoxical condition of his existential self-realization, a reality which radically transcends the bounds of immanent self-reflection. This is the final point of transition from the dialectical pathos of Religiousness A to the paradoxical dialectic of Christianity, or Religiousness B:

> The distinction between the pathetic and the dialectical must, however, be more closely defined; for religiousness A is by no means undialectical, but is not paradoxically dialectic. Religiousness A is the dialectic of inward self-transformation . . . and so is conditioned only by the inwardness of appropriation and its dialectic. Religiousness B . . . does on the contrary posit conditions, of such a sort that they are not merely deeper dialectical apprehensions of inwardness, but are a definite something which defines more closely the eternal happiness (whereas in A the only closer definitions are the closer definitions of inward apprehension), not defining more closely the individual apprehension of it, but defining more closely the eternal happiness itself, though not as a task for thought, but paradoxically, as a repellent to produce new pathos.[41]

The subjective thinker of Religiousness A thus discovers that he must carry out a radical redefinition of the very conditions of the possibility of existential self-realization, if his ethical task is to have hope of fulfillment. But this redefinition entails that finite subjectivity can reach concrete expression not through thought, however authentically subjective in its orientation, but solely through the faith of a sinful, paradoxically accentuated exister in the Paradoxical itself.

If the very nature of human thinking--at least when it is genuine thought, concrete and passionately subjective in orientation--is to seek self-understanding, and if, in pursuit of that self-understanding, the subjective thinker finds it subjectively necessary to will the paradoxical overcoming of subjective thought in the leap of faith, then it would be misleading to claim that thought and faith are radically discontinuous modes of existence. Rather, since only faith enables the exister fully to experience the truth of existential selfhood, a truth which subjective thinking itself seeks but cannot concretely actualize, then faith must be

[41] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 494.

seen as the "handmaiden" of that subjective thought. Kierkegaard asserts that the "will to paradox" is the engine of all human thinking, to such an extent that " . . . the paradox is the source of the thinker's passion, and the thinker without a paradox is like a lover without feeling . . . ."[42] But, if this is the case, then faith does not so much effect a despairing denial of the power of thought, as provide for its existentially valid (subjectively rational) culmination in an encounter with the Paradoxical:

> The supreme passion of the Reason is to seek a collision, though this collision must in one way or another prove its undoing. The supreme paradox of all thought is the attempt to discover something that thought cannot think. This passion is at bottom present in all thinking, even in the thinking of the individual, insofar as in thinking he participates in something transcending himself.[43]
>
> Faith has two tasks: to take care in every moment to discover the improbable, the paradox; and then to hold it fast with the passion of inwardness. The common conception is that . . . the paradoxical is something to which faith is related only passively. . . . No, faith is self-active in its relation to . . . the paradoxical, self-active in the discovery, and self-active every moment in holding it fast. . . . Where the understanding despairs, faith is already present to make the despair properly decisive.[44]

The passionate quest of subjective thought to discover that which is "the different, the absolutely different"[45] from itself, already

[42] Søren Kierkegaard, Philosophical Fragments, original trans., David F. Swenson; revised trans., Howard V. Hong, 2nd ed. (1936; Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1962), p. 46. But though here Kierkegaard draws thinking and passion together in the activity of "subjective reflection," the highest point of thought is to transcend itself in passion. Thus, only passion remains--distilled out, as it were, as an end product of authentic reflection. It is worthwhile here again to compare this assessment of thought with that of Hegel, for whom both reflective understanding and subjective passion are "Aufgehoben" in the speculative unity of absolute reason, and find each their concrete significance thereby.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 209.

[45] Kierkegaard, Philosophical Fragments, p. 55.

points toward the final paradoxical leap from reason to faith. But faith, in actively seeking and holding fast the paradoxical, clearly participates in this fundamental task of existential thought:

> Reason, in its paradoxical passion, precisely desires its own downfall. But this is what the Paradox also desires, and thus they are at bottom linked in understanding, but this understanding is present only in the moment of passion.[46]

The moment of faith, then, is already present, though in a less radical form than within Christianity proper, in the immanent striving of Religiousness A. Indeed, Kierkegaard insists that any mode which holds fast to the paradoxical relationship between the finite, existing subject and the Eternal Truth (as, for example, did Socrates) partakes "of the paradoxical and of faith," in a way which places such a standpoint "fundamentally in advance of speculative philosophy."[47] But, though "to understand oneself in existence was the Greek principle,"[48] the kind of reflective self-expression occurring within ethical immanence is merely an "analogue" to that "infinitely more profound"[49] self-understanding which becomes possible through confronting the Christian paradox:

> To understand oneself in existence is also the Christian principle, except that this "self" has received far richer and deeper determination, still more difficult to understand, in conjunction with existence. . . . The difficulty is greater . . . because still greater contradictions are conjoined, existence being accentuated paradoxically as sin, and eternity accentuated paradoxically as God in time.[50]

The possibility of this doubly paradoxical Christian faith arises only for an ethically-inward, subjective thinker--one who has already attempted, but failed, to potentiate his subjectivity by following the path of immanent self-reflection. For such an exister, the absurd reality of a temporal Absolute, Christ, presents itself

[46] Kierkegaard, Philosophical Fragments, p. 59.

[47] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 185, footnote.

[48] Ibid., p. 315.

[49] Ibid., p. 184.

[50] Ibid., p. 316.

as the sole source of release from the "subjective untruth" of sin-consciousness, by offering him hope that, despite the limits of finite existence, his existence can, albeit paradoxically, be conjoined with its Absolute Other, God. The contingent, historical existence of the God/man--a paradox in itself--presents itself as a paradigmatic resolution of the contradictions of existence--a resolution, however, which can only be decisively appropriated through faith, never rationally comprehended, by the existing individual. The uniquely redemptive relationship possible between these two paradoxically accentuated, radically separate, and mutually repellent realities--the sinful individual and the God/man--constitute the Absolute Paradox of Christianity:

> In order to be man's Teacher, the God proposed to make himself like the individual man, so that he might understand him fully. Thus, our paradox is rendered still more appalling, or the same paradox has the double aspect which proclaims it as the Absolute Paradox; negatively by revealing the absolute unlike of sin, positively by proposing to do away with the absolute unlikeness in absolute likeness.[51]

Clearly, although faith, and in particular Christian faith, is now identified as "the highest passion in the sphere of subjectivity"--a passion potentiated in proportion to the intensity of its paradoxical relation to thought--this by no means indicates that, for Kierkegaard, faith is an abstract assertion of individual will, arbitrary, subjective, and without definable content. In fact, as we have seen, the entire dialectic of immanent self-reflection prepares the ethical exister to choose himself through this unique form of subjective inwardness--a form whose value rests not simply upon its extreme subjective intensity, therefore, but upon a degree of inwardness which becomes possible only as the culminating stage in a lengthy and complex struggle to achieve selfhood. Further, the paradox which forms the content of Christianity, and challenges the

[51] Kierkegaard, Philosophical Fragments, pp. 58-59. According to Kierkegaard, not even existential self-reflection can ultimately draw a distinction which is absolute between the finite self and the Divine--but ends always by undermining this absolute difference, confusing the categories of like/unlike. Thus, immanent, ethico-religious thought finds it subjectively necessary to transcend itself, i.e., to acknowledge that knowledge of the absolute difference can only come from the side of God himself: hence, the radical facticity, externality of the Christian Paradox, which an exister must decisively choose in faith.

exister to decisive self-realization, is no mere dialectical riddle, distinctive only for its logical absurdity, but " . . . an existential communication expressing an existential contradiction,"[52] a contradiction which arises only when concrete, finite existence is put together with the paradox of the God-man.[53] Thus, faith has both a unique subjective form and a unique existential content, which radically distinguishes it from all mere fanaticism, on the one hand, but also from that "absence of inwardness" characteristic of the dispassionate method of speculative thought, on the other.

No one who has not already decisively understood the irreducible priority of existence--and so continuously strives to resist the temptation to abandon existential inwardness in favor of "the way of objective reflection" which "makes the subject accidental"[54]--can ever find himself in that condition of existential anguish within which a radical leap of faith seems either meaningful or possible. Thus, one cannot view Kierkegaard's existential dialectic as a rationally necessary movement, relentlessly propelling the individual beyond immanence toward the Christian religion, as the sole logical, philosophically sanctioned solution to the dilemmas of finite existence.[55] Nevertheless, Kierkegaard's stress upon that will to

[52] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 339.

[53] Ibid., p. 196.

[54] Ibid., p. 173.

[55] This is Kierkegaard's central difficulty with Hegel's assessment of Christianity. Speculative thought, Kierkegaard asserts, never really raises the question of what Christianity essentially is, but assumes that it is primarily a doctrine, with a philosophical content destined to be mediated by speculative thought (see CUP, p. 339, footnote). But this is precisely to ignore the chief message and purpose of Christianity which, while it is doubtless in one sense a doctrine, has as its doctrinal content a paradox which resists in principle all attempts at mediation. Thus, "If the question of understanding is to be raised in connection with a doctrine of the latter sort, this must consist in understanding that the task is to exist in it, in understanding the difficulty of existing in it, and what a tremendous existential task such a doctrine posits . . ." (ibid., p. 339, footnote). No matter how high Hegel elevates Christianity (and he does view it as the Absolute Religion--a true content lacking only philosophical form to render it absolute truth) this elevation misconstrues the essential significance of Christian

paradox and self-overcoming which is implicit in all authentically human thought, coupled with his insistence that, when the dialectical contradictions revealed by such a subjective thinker's efforts to exist authentically bring him to the point of despair, and so of faith, then "the existing individual's postulation of God is a necessity," do indicate that his intention is "to make the necessity of the paradox evident."[56] This necessity, however, is itself "subjective"--i.e., it is meaningful only within the context of a life tempered by the struggles of ethico-religious immanence, and brought, through them, to the point of passionate decision. Unless the individual has experienced despair over the possibility of becoming himself, the unique redemptive message which is the Christian "existence-communication"[57] will go unheard; indeed, by any merely objective thinker, it will be dismissed as logical nonsense, because, for such an individual, existence and its concerns are inessential, the demands of systematic thought all-inclusive.

4. Socratic Ignorance: An Analogue to Christian Faith

The relationship of the subject to the content of his thought is the chief concern of all truly existential knowing:

> . . . the point is precisely the relationship of the subject. If truth is spirit, it is an inward transformation, a realization of inwardness; it is not an immediate . . . relationship between an immediate consciousness and a sum of propositions, even if this relationship . . . is called

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faith, i.e., its meaning for an isolated, despairing finite subject, for whom it appears as the Absolute Paradox, an "existential communication" whose paradigmatic, paradoxical reality calls the exister to realize himself decisively within finite existence, rather than enabling him to reduce himself and his finite freedom to a "transient factor" within the indifferent milieu of speculative thought. For Kierkegaard it is rather that "finitude receives its validity first in Christianity. Speculation acquires its true fulcrum first in Christianity, and freedom its reality." (SKJP, IV, p. 106, #4004).

[56] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 191.

[57] "Christianity is an existence-communication which makes the thing of existing paradoxical and difficult to a degree it never was before and never can be outside Christianity" (ibid., p. 501).

> by the name which stands for the most decisive expression for subjectivity: faith.[58]

Both Socrates, who "believed that there was a God," and therefore "held fast to the objective uncertainty with the whole passion of his inwardness,"[59] and the Christian exister, for whom objective uncertainty yields to the certainty that the object of his belief

[58] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 37. Kierkegaard here repudiates the suggestion, common among many 19th-century theologians and philosophers, that faith, in contrast to thinking, represents a direct, immediate, and unreflected relationship of the beliver to God (see Schleiermacher's view that faith is a feeling of dependence on an absolute power, spontaneous and unreflective. "What Schleiermacher calls 'religion' . . . is after all nothing else than the first immediacy, the prerequisite for everything . . . and which therefore cannot be properly characterized with these words [faith and religion]" [SKJP, II, p. 3, #1096]). In fact, Kierkegaard views objective thinking as involving a direct grasp of its content, i.e., of propositional truths, while faith, in common with ethical self-reflection, contains an irreducible element of uncertainty and self-conscious doubt. The passion of faith is thus not simply a feeling (since feelings, simply as given data, are immediate and indubitable) but involves a reflected decision to hold fast to its content, despite the risk this entails. The passion of faith is thus not immediate, but the result, the culminating perspective of an exister who has experienced himself as guilty, self-alienated and in despair over the possibility of self-realization: "Faith, therefore . . . is not an immediate instinct of the heart, but is the paradox of life and existence" (Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, p. 58). While the aim of objective thinking, even as it entertains specific doubts regarding the veracity of its propositions, is ideally to eradicate all doubt, the presence of any direct certainty regarding one's status as a believer, or regarding the object of one's belief, indicates a lack of faith, because it indicates the absence of spirituality, or of inwardness: "If the uncertainty which is the mark and form of faith ceases, we have not advanced in religiosity, but have retreated to childish forms of it. As soon as the uncertainty ceases to be the form of the certainty . . . that moment the individual is on the point of becoming a mere dead weight" (CUP, p. 453). This is particularly so in Christian faith, which attests to the reality of the God-man, and to the individual's paradoxical personal relationship to that paradoxical reality: "I cannot get an immediate certainty about my relationship to Christ. I cannot get an immediate certainty about whether I have faith, for to have faith is this very dialectical suspension which is continually in fear and trembling, and yet never despairs. Faith is precisely this infinite self-concern, which keeps one awake in risking everything, this self-concern about whether one really has faith--and precisely this self-concern is faith" (SKJP, I, p. 108, #255).

[59] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 188.

is absurd, share a determination to maintain this standpoint of subjective inwardness. Both assert this in face of the gravest of risks; indeed, the degree of risk, of uncertainty, is commensurate with the depth of existential inwardness attained. This is because the decisiveness of individual existence is enhanced by the breadth of the gulf between the exister and that which he decisively affirms. It is absolutely enhanced, therefore, when the content of his decision is the absolutely absurd, i.e., that which, because it is experienced as the absolute Other of finite, self-divided individuality, repels all thought that it can be understood or chosen by an existing subject:

> The Socratic secret, which must be preserved in Christianity . . . and which in Christianity receives an intensification, by means of a more profound inwardness which makes it infinite, is that the movement of the spirit is inwardness, that the truth is the subject's transformation in himself.[60]

The individual who already, Socratically, understands the burden of subjective existence, is prepared to encounter the intrinsically absurd. If he then paradoxically chooses himself in relationship to it, he confronts the highest possible degree of risk, and so develops the full potential "of the primary potentiality which is subjectivity,"[61] or faith:

> When the paradox is paradoxical in itself, it repels the individual by virtue of its absurdity, and the corresponding passion of inwardness is faith. But subjectivity, inwardness, is the truth; for otherwise we have forgotten what the merit of the Socratic position is. But there can be no stronger expression for inwardness than when the retreat out of existence into the eternal by way of recollection is impossible, and when, with truth confronting the individual as a paradox, gripped in the anguish and pain of sin . . . the individual believes.[62]

Clearly, the emergence of Christian faith dialectically[63] depends

[60] Kierkegaard, CUP, pp. 37-38.

[61] Ibid., p. 116.

[62] Ibid., p. 188.

[63] In Kierkegaard's sense of "dialectic," i.e., not a logically mediated transition from one universal category to the next, but a series of discontinuous, existential "leaps," which are passionate responses, by an individual subject, to his need for existential self-realization.

upon the individual's prior pursuit of ethical selfhood: it is only after the implications of this ethical task have been fully appropriated, as occurs in the movements of Religiousness A, that the final, paradoxical leap to faith in the absurd, the strongest possible expression of inwardness, itself becomes possible. Both Socrates and the Christian believer share the ethical goal of self-understanding[64]--but Christianity, by "paradoxically accentuating" both finite existence and the divine reality, marks a radical advance over the ironic ethical inwardness which finds expression in "Socratic ignorance."

Socratic ignorance--as an ethical subject's ironic response to the speculative thesis that "all knowledge is recollection"--preserves the integrity of finite, individual existence by refusing to accept, as a necessary corollary of this thesis, the view that the individual thinker either can or should in knowing seek to identify himself with the Eternal Truth. The doctrine of recollection, says Kierkegaard, was held in common by Socrates and Plato: but while for Plato, as for his nineteenth-century philosophical successors, this

[64] John W. Elrod, Being and Existence in Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Works (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975) argues convincingly that both Socrates and Christianity are "concerned with the same self," the only difference between them lying in Christianity's paradoxical accentuation of "the temporal and eternal poles of the self, so that it becomes 'still more difficult' to understand oneself in existence" (p. 248). Elrod concludes that this continuity of existential self-concern establishes the dialectical dependence of Christian faith upon earlier attempts at self-realization, although he says Kierkegaard stops short of implying that Christianity can be "reduced to an ontology" of the self (p. 249). It is the presence in Kierkegaard's thought of the transcendent fact of God freely entering time, Elrod claims, which prevents him from ever adopting such a position. Nevertheless, it seems to me that Kierkegaard's very assumption that this transcendent fact is absurd--and that the exister's faith in it is paradoxical--rests unavoidably upon a highly individualistic assessment of the ontological structure of the self, an assessment from which flow his descriptions of the nature and purpose of the subject's ethical activity. The absolute transcendence of the central Christian fact, then, seems intrinsically bound up with Kierkegaard's central insistence upon preserving and realizing the radical individual freedom of the existing subject. This latter aim, of course, is unique to an existential approach to Christianity--but not necessarily descriptive of the Christian faith and its content, as such.

doctrine implies that there is no absolute distinction between the individual and the eternal, so that "speculatively and eternally there is no paradox,"[65] Socrates relates to this doctrine as to a "constantly rejected possibility."[66] Unlike Plato and later speculative thinkers, Socrates resists the temptation to forget his status as an existing thinker: thus, although he agrees with the Platonic view that "the eternal essential truth is by no means in its own nature paradoxical,"[67] yet he insists that "when the eternal truth is related to an existing individual, it becomes a paradox."[68] For an exister, then, there can be no direct, certain apprehension of God, the Eternal Truth, since when, from within the context of finite, temporal becoming

> . . . I contemplate the order of nature in the hope of finding God . . . I see omnipotence and wisdom, but I also see much else that disturbs my mind and excites anxiety. The sum of all this is an objective uncertainty. But it is for this very reason that the inwardness becomes as intense as it is, for it embraces this objective uncertainty with the entire passion of the infinite.[69]

Now if the individual who thus affirms an objective uncertainty were a detached, scholarly investigator who, having discovered that the results of his studies were inconclusive nevertheless resolved to affirm them with "infinite passion," he might justifiably be dismissed as a fanatic, bent upon exercising an arbitrarily subjective will to power. Indeed, many commentators upon Kierkegaard's notion of truth have argued that he is the proponent of precisely such an irrationalism, which seeks to aggrandize the subjective will through denying the value of objective knowledge, and in fact through requiring that the content of the existential will be devoid

[65] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 184, footnote.

[66] Ibid. " . . . another Socratic proposition . . . that all knowledge is recollection . . . is not for Socrates a cue to the speculative enterprise. . . . Here the way swings off; Socrates concentrates essentially upon accentuating existence, while Plato forgets this and loses himself in speculation."

[67] Ibid.

[68] Ibid., p. 187.

[69] Ibid., p. 182.

of objective significance.[70] But this is to misconstrue the intent of Kierkegaard's emphasis upon inwardness and its orientation toward the essentially uncertain.

The individual who "contemplates the order of nature hoping to find God" is clearly not at the outset a detached, objective investigator of reality, who having become frustrated by a lack of success turns inward, in pursuit of at least subjective satisfaction. He is already conscious of himself as primarily an existing subject, concerned for his individual spiritual well-being, rather than with the disinterested accumulation of objectively certain data. From this Socratic point of view, the wealth of mathematical, scientific knowledge and the like is "accidental . . . a matter of indifference,"[71] even though its veracity is evident, and the pursuit of further such knowledge offers the hope of an ever-increasing array of certainties. But because he is aware of the nature of individual existence, and because he acknowledges that this existential status places stringent requirements upon him, the Socratic thinker refuses the illusory comfort of merely objective knowledge. Although he recognizes the paradoxical implications of his ideal, he aspires instead to bring himself, precisely qua finite exister, into relationship with God, the Eternal Truth as such. This leads, however, to a new, existential definition of truth as "an objective uncertainty held fast in an appropriation-process of the most passionate inwardness,"[72] whereby the Socratic individual finds himself to be "in the truth," to exist in authentic inwardness, not by virtue of objective knowledge, but "by virtue of his ignorance."[73]

[70] Richard Schacht, Arthur E. Murphy, Brand Blanshard, and Henry Allison (see Bibliography) are among those who, although their writings differ sharply over many specific points of interpretation, share the general conclusion that Kierkegaard's notion of subjective truth is fundamentally irrationalist, and indifferent to matters of content in knowledge.

[71] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 183.

[72] Ibid., p. 182.

[73] Ibid., p. 183.

The value and limits of this Socratic standpoint, then, are highly specific. It does not imply a critique of objective knowledge as such, nor does it recommend the cultivation, in the interests of subjective freedom, of an arbitrarily subjective response to all objective content. The sole context within which ignorance is a higher condition than certainty is in the area of "essential knowledge," that knowledge which has to do with "spirit . . . inward transformation, a realization of inwardness."[74] This is so because, in such a context, all claim to objective certainty--indeed, the very assumption that objective knowledge is possible--indicates a failure to appreciate either what it means to be an existing individual, finite and temporal, or what alone is of genuine significance for such an inwardly existing subject. Socratic ignorance, based on the ironic refusal to dabble in either speculation or objective calculation regarding such important matters, is thus an indirect indication of an exister's "knowledge," of his insight into the implications of finite temporality, and of his determination to persist in his faith that, despite its resistance to objective verification, it remains an appropriate task for finite spirit to seek his own essential truth in a paradoxical relationship to the Eternal Truth as such.

But while Socratic ignorance represents an authentic response to the problem of finite existence, it is nevertheless limited in the degree of inwardness it makes possible. Although Socrates rejects the possibility of "taking oneself back into the eternal by way of recollection," he does maintain the validity of the doctrine of recollection. He accepts that the temporal individual always already stands in an internal, essential relationship to the Eternal Truth--a relationship, however, which cannot be actualized due to the nature of finite existence. The aim of Socratic "midwifery" is simply to awaken men to their status and to its paradoxical implications; he seeks not to inculcate a body of speculative doctrine, but to encourage the temporal individual to look within himself and there

[74] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 37.

discover his immanent link with eternal wisdom.[75] From the Socratic perspective, despite his emphasis upon the irreducibility of ethical inwardness, temporal finitude nevertheless appears as an unfortunate limiting factor, which both prevents the exister from completing the recollective process, but which further, forces him to acknowledge the act of existing itself as an essential element in any expression of human truth:

> . . . with respect to the knowledge of the eternal truth the individual is confronted with no other difficulty than the circumstance that he exists, which difficulty, however, is so essential and decisive for him that it means that existing, the process of transformation to inwardness in and by existing, is the truth.[76]

The Socratic perspective thus preserves the truth of finite subjectivity, but by continuing to insist upon the assumption of an a priori bond between the individual knower and Eternal Truth, it drains finite existence of its intrinsic significance. Even though Socrates never follows the Platonic path back into the Eternal through speculation, the degree of risk, hence of decisive inwardness demanded of an individual, is mitigated by its very presence as an alternative, so that

> . . . existence in time does not have any decisive significance, because the possibility of taking oneself back into eternity through recollection is always there, though this possibility is constantly nullified by using the time, not for speculation, but for the transformation to inwardness in existing.[77]

But if even Socrates' diligent pursuit of inwardness has limits, is it possible that some "expression for the truth can be found which has a still higher degree of inwardness"?[78] We have already seen that for Kierkegaard this higher expression can only be Christianity, which expresses the full truth of finite subjectivity by

[75] A good example of this technique is the Socratic dialogue The Meno, where Socrates enables the slave-boy Meno to discover for himself the knowledge of eternal truth which lies already implicit within him.

[76] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 184.

[77] Ibid.

[78] Ibid., p. 185.

paradoxically positing it as untruth. As long as an exister regards himself as even potentially capable of unity with God through immanent self-reflection, he implicitly acquiesces in the speculative corollary that the truth of finite subjectivity ultimately rests with its reabsorption into the eternal, rather than in preserving its unique inwardness in existing. Only when the very possibility of recollection, of a speculative "escape" is definitely denied, can it be said that due weight is granted to individual existence.

And yet, paradoxically, it seems that this full measure of significance comes about through the thesis that the truth of finite subjectivity is its untruth:

> Socratically speaking, subjectivity is untruth if it refuses to understand that subjectivity is truth, but, for example, desires to become objective.[79]

In other words, Socratically, the chief concern is to preserve the truth of inwardness over against the objective uncertainty of speculative recollection--not to deny that such recollection has any meaning from within the standpoint of existence, but simply to insist that for an exister, inward self-transformation must be the priority. The existing subject's prime concern must be with himself, not with objective speculation, but with ethical becoming, which thus is his truth.

Now when Christianity declares that subjectivity is untruth, it might appear to be offering religious support for the speculative doctrine that the finite subject finds his truth by abandoning his individuality and ethical inwardness, and accepting that he is essentially an element within a higher dialectical synthesis.[80] But while speculative philosophy disregards the Socratic injunction to inwardness, and claims that subjectivity is untruth, it does so "in order to stimulate a movement in precisely the opposite direction, namely in the direction of the principle that objectivity is truth."[81]

[79] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 185.

[80] This is precisely the erroneous view of Christianity which Kierkegaard identifies as Hegel's.

[81] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 185. "Speculative philosophy . . . has maltreated Christianity, which is once for all the paradox, and paradoxical at every point. Speculative philosophy remains in the

Thus it seeks to remove the element of uncertainty, of risk which characterizes subjective existence.

The message of Christianity, according to Kierkegaard, is exactly the reverse: its claim is not that the exister is in untruth until he acknowledges the truth of a higher speculative unity, but rather that existence itself so profoundly marks him that simply through entering time, the individual "bears the stamp of having been essentially altered by existence."[82] Having "in this manner acquired a power over him,"[83] temporal existence makes it impossible for him to accomplish a speculative mediation between himself and the Eternal Truth. Fully to express the truth of being a finite subject then, one must accept that "the back door of recollection is forever closed," so that not only, as in Socratic faith, does the Christian exister recognize "the dubiety of taking himself speculatively out of existence" and that "existing is his essential task"[84]--but he further accentuates the seriousness of this task by infinitely widening the gulf between himself and the Absolute, thus requiring of himself a decisiveness, a "grave strenuousity" beside which "the Socratic existential inwardness is as Greek light-mindedness."[85]

Now if such an individual, irrevocably entangled in time and finitude--therefore radically other than the divine, a sinner--nevertheless aspires to a God-relationship, he cannot hope to accomplish this through immanent self-reflection. The ethical demand for self-realization, as this is articulated by Socrates,

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sphere of the immanent, where recollection takes itself out of existence. . . . It uses the decisive expressions merely as phraseology, and thus becomes a pagan reminiscence, against which there is nothing to object if it straightforwardly breaks with Christianity, but much to object to if it assumes to be Christianity." Ibid., p. 194.

[82] Ibid., p. 186.

[83] Ibid.

[84] Ibid., p. 187.

[85] Ibid., p. 188.

and in the movements of Religiousness A, requires the subject to become in actuality what he in principle already is. Such an individual "In time . . . recollects that he is eternal."[86] In Christianity, however, this ethical ideal is transformed into the requirement that the exister, a sinner, become what he manifestly is not. The paradoxical message of Christianity is that

> The individual who was not eternal now becomes such, and so does not recollect what he is, but becomes what he was not. . . . This proposition inaccessible to thought is: that one can become eternal though one was not such.[87]

Further, once the truth of subjectivity as untruth is accepted, the exister seeking self-realization through a God-relationship must do so exclusively from within the parameters of temporal becoming: "Forward he must, backward he cannot go."[88] He can no longer reflect himself back into a primordially present, immanent bond with a Divine Ground, but must decisively leap, with paradoxical faith, toward union with the absurd reality of a fully temporal, historical Absolute.

5. Paradoxical Faith: The Leap to the Absurd

> What now is the absurd? The absurd is--that the eternal truth has come into being in time, that God has come into being . . . precisely like any other individual human being, quite indistinguishable from other individuals.[89]

It may seem that for Kierkegaard this category of the absurd has a primarily instrumental significance--that it is introduced as the ultimate means for infinitizing the passionate inwardness of finite subjective existence, by setting over against thought a paradox so extreme that it can only be embraced passionately, by one who is willing to take "the absolute venture and the absolute risk"

[86] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 508.

[87] Ibid.

[88] Ibid., p. 187.

[89] Ibid., p. 188.

of "venturing to believe against his understanding."[90] This view does find some support in key passages of the Postscript. Kierkegaard insists there that "the greater the risk, the greater the faith,"[91] which indeed suggests that whatever paradox can provoke the highest degree of risk is existentially of greatest value. Now, if the risk taken by the believer is proportional to the degree of objective uncertainty surrounding his object of belief, then, clearly, the absolutely paradoxical, that which is with certainty absurd, produces the highest level of "objective repulsion,"[92] and so serves as a stimulus for the most passionate faith. Since Christianity confronts the individual with precisely such an absolute absurdity, it would seem that Christianity provides the greatest possible stimulus to inwardness.

Further, if one accepts that the ontological structure of finite spirit is such that, in order to realize the self in truth and freedom, the existing spirit must absolutely affirm the absurd--that which is "paradoxical in itself and not simply in relation to an exister"[93]--and, if Christianity presents the exister with just such an absolute paradox, it might appear that any confirmation of such utility in absolutely intensifying subjective inwardness constitutes a kind of metaphysical argument for the instrumental truth of Christianity.[94]

[90] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 384.

[91] Ibid., p. 184.

[92] Ibid., p. 189.

[93] Ibid., p. 188.

[94] Like the existence of God, the objective truth of Christianity is of no concern to a subjective exister: to seek objective verification is precisely to show that one has not understood the truth of Christianity. Yet, to deny that an exister can conceive of Christianity as valid in itself--and not simply valid in relation to the existing subject who appropriates it--seems to me inconsistent with Kierkegaard's central contention (essential, if Christianity is to be seen as the final stage in the quest for selfhood), that Christianity is not simply paradoxical in relation to existence, but paradoxical in itself--a claim, however, which is surely beyond the scope of a mere existing subject to make.

This is the conclusion reached, for instance, by Richard Schacht,[95] who points out that the chief importance of the leap of faith for Kierkegaard lies in the intensification of subjective passion which it makes possible, rather than in the God-relationship which is its proximal goal. Thus it is the sheer logical absurdity of the Christian paradox of the God-man, and not any intrinsic significance which the Incarnation may possess, which supremely qualifies it as the sole authentic content for existential inwardness.

Schacht goes on to suggest that if what counts is simply the paradoxicality of the claim, then surely Kierkegaard displays a great lack of imagination, since it is relatively easy to conceive of paradoxes more enigmatic than the Christian Incarnation: he proposes several candidates, among them the notion that Hitler, not Jesus, was God; or that God existed, not in human form, but as an animal or a rock. It can be argued, though, that Schacht here mistakenly interprets Kierkegaard's notion of "passionate inwardness," seeing it as arising in direct contrast to the standpoint of objective understanding, so that whatever most outrages the principles of logic provides the greatest stimulus to passion.

A thesis of this present study, however, is that for Kierkegaard, the sphere of subjective existence develops through an immanent dialectic, in which passion and understanding combine in the interests of existential self-apprehension. Thus, the passionate leap of faith constitutes a paradoxical breach not with objective or with metaphysical thinking, but rather with this immanent, non-metaphysical dialectic of self-understanding and self-choice. Schacht, however, seems to attribute to Kierkegaard's Christian a metaphysical viewpoint: one adopted, to be sure, in express opposition to Hegel's speculative metaphysics, but nevertheless consisting in a set of arguments, designed to substantiate the "objective truth" of Christianity as the chief stimulus to subjective inwardness. This seems, however, not to take seriously enough Kierkegaard's express disavowals of any interest

[95] Richard Schacht, "Kierkegaard on 'Truth is Subjectivity' and the 'Leap of Faith,'" in his Hegel and After (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1975), pp. 119-134.

in making metaphysical truth-claims, as well as his specific insistence that Christianity is not a metaphysical, but an "existence" communication.

Thus, although Kierkegaard does often characterize the category of the absurd in this instrumental fashion, and while doubtless it is possible to treat the Christian paradox in a purely objective manner, as the supreme irrationality, such interpretations overlook the significance of the context of subjective reflection within which alone, Kierkegaard insists, the absurd can become the absolute focus for an exister's interest:

> The matter is quite simple. In order to have faith, there must first be existence, an existential qualification. This is what I am never sufficiently able to emphasize--that to have faith . . . there must be the situation. And this situation must be brought about by an existential step on the part of the individual.[96]

Thus, no one who is not already an ethically-inward individual, who does not already understand the subjective necessity, together with the painful existential impossibility, of achieving self-synthesis through freely drawing finite existence into an "absolute relationship with the Absolute," can approach the Christian paradox in a spirit appropriate for discerning its genuine import.

Underlying all the movements of ethical becoming and of Religiousness A has been the exister's need to achieve self-identity, to draw into concrete synthesis those conflicting dimensions of finite and infinite which he discovers within himself. His attempts to understand/choose himself as concrete subjectivity, however, have led to the despairing realization that to be an exister is to be irrevocably condemned to self-diremption, while yet, paradoxically, to seek redress for this alienated condition through accomplishing, within temporal existence itself, an absolute relationship with the divine Other. Thus, when Kierkegaard says that "faith is essentially this--to hold fast to possibility,"[97] and describes the individual who makes the leap of faith as affirming that "with God all things are possible," he is not simply indicating a correlation between the

[96] SKJP, II, p. 20, #1142.

[97] Ibid., p. 13, #1126.

heights of subjective passion and the greatest conceivable logical contradiction, i.e., the abstract thought that God can accomplish anything, even the seemingly absurd feat of becoming finite.

This, however, is again Richard Schacht's interpretation.[98] In the context of comparing the faith of Abraham when he assents to sacrifice Isaac, and that of the Christian who affirms the Incarnation, Schacht suggests that the essential distinction between these two modes of inwardness is the sheer logical extremity of the paradox confronting the Christian:

> Kierkegaard seems to feel that there is nothing more paradoxical--and therefore nothing seemingly more impossible--than the idea that God . . . should have become man . . . without ceasing to be God. If . . . God has done this, then he has shown in the most radical way that with him absolutely anything is possible. At least one point of making the doctrine of the Incarnation central to Christianity, for Kierkegaard, is that one's willingness to accept the idea that God existed as man is the ultimate test of one's faith that with him all things are possible. . . . A greater faith than Abraham's is required for one to affirm that God can do the logically (and not merely humanly) impossible.[99]

But the exister who affirms the Christian paradox is concerned with one possibility--that of fully realizing himself within existence. Clearly, therefore, Kierkegaard is not claiming as the chief virtue of the Christian paradox its sheer logical impossibility. This feature alone could not lead the ethico-religious seeker to fasten his hopes for eternal happiness--for concrete self-realization--upon the category of the absurd. In general, questions of mere formal logical consistency hold no essential interest for an ethical subject; a fortiori such an individual would not seek authentic inwardness through the arbitrary affirmation of whatever logical conundrum happens to be most contradictory. This would be to identify subjectivity with "the angular, the accidental," to confuse it with abstract fanaticism--whereas, as we have seen throughout this study, for Kierkegaard, genuine existential selfhood is solely a function of achieving an "absolute relation with the Absolute." It is the

[98] Schacht, "Kierkegaard's Phenomenology of Spiritual Development," in Hegel and After, pp. 135-174.

[99] Ibid., pp. 169-170.

absurd possibility of actually realizing this relationship, which existence itself has shown him to be impossible, which alone inspires the exister to faith in the Christian paradox.

Having understood the self-contradictory implications of the immanent quest for selfhood, the religious exister finds himself in despair over the possibility of realizing the God-relationship. What such an exister needs is not some arbitrary, or even miraculous sign which through its sheer logical absurdity encourages him to believe that with God all things are possible. His need is more specific--indeed, it is unique to the condition of being an exister, for whom self-realization is the sole essential concern. For such an individual, in fact, only the Christian paradox--which conveys a singular "existence-communication," rather than simply the consummate logical puzzle--addresses that need, and so evokes the passionate response of faith:

> Subjectivity culminates in passion, Christianity is the paradox, paradox and passion are a mutual fit, and the paradox is altogether suited to one whose situation is, to be in the extremity of existence.[100]

In the interest of bringing the unique significance of the absolute paradox into prominence, Kierkegaard distinguishes it from all lesser forms of paradox:

> This is what I have developed (for example, in Concluding Unscientific Postscript)--that not every absurdity is the absurd or the paradox . . . it is nothing but superficiality to think that the absurd is not a concept, that all sorts of absurdities are equally at home in the absurd.[101]

He excludes from consideration not only the merely logically paradoxical, but also those possibilities which, through their very unusualness, might seem to qualify as the absurd: "The absurd . . . is not identical with the improbable, the unexpected, the unforeseen."[102] Finally, he dismisses all "aesthetic" attempts to distinguish

[100] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 206.

[101] SKJP, I, pp. 4-5, #7; see also ibid., I, p. 7, #10, "The absurd is not the absurd or absurdities without any distinction. . . . The absurd is a category, and the most developed thought is required to define the Christian absurd accurately. . . . The absurd . . . is the negative criterion of the divine or of the relationship to the divine."

[102] Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, p. 57.

the absolute paradox in terms of its historical singularity alone. While the fact of the God-man is doubtless a unique historical occurrence, this absurd fact is not directly recognizable by virtue of its sheer novelty in the context of human events. In fact, Kierkegaard insists, "The novelty of Christianity . . . has behind it the eternal religiousness of hidden inwardness,"[103] so that it is recognizable as an absolutely unique possibility only for the exister who has already experienced the futility of all attempts to realize selfhood through the dialectic of immanent self-reflection. Viewed by one not engaged upon the ethico-religious struggle, the uniqueness of the event can only be "lumped at random with other novelties," or at best singled out by "the affirmation that among all novelties it is the most remarkable"[104]--a qualification, however, which annuls its uniqueness, by distinguishing it through relativizing comparisons.

But if the absurd is not characterizable as the ultimate logical conundrum, nor as an aesthetically remarkable incursion into human affairs, neither is it fruitful to approach the Christian paradox from the speculative point of view. The temptation to accept the pervasive idealist "explanation" of the Incarnation as an expression of the dialectical unity between the logical categories of existence and eternity, Kierkegaard asserts, must be resisted. The speculative thinker does not try to understand the meaning, for an exister, of the category of the absurd, but rather, under the guise of deepening his insight into the nature of the paradox, actually succeeds only in explaining it away. He proclaims acceptance of the essential truth of the paradox, but then insists that he "does not remain standing at the standpoint of the paradox."[105] But this can only mean that such a thinker seeks a higher understanding, a speculative truth beyond the paradoxical message of Christianity, which accordingly takes upon itself the absolute significance initially

[103] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 480, footnote. See also ibid., p. 515.

[104] Ibid. One can surmise that for Kierkegaard Richard Schacht's account of the significance of the Christian paradox would be "aesthetic" only.

[105] Ibid., p. 195.

attributed to Christianity:

> Christianity as understood by the speculative philosopher is something different from Christianity as expounded for the simple. For them it is a paradox; but the speculative philosopher knows how to abrogate the paradox. So that it is not Christianity which is and was and remains the truth, and what the speculative philosopher understands is not that Christianity is the truth; no, it is the philosopher's understanding of Christianity that constitutes the truth of Christianity.[106]

But if despair--"the extremity of existence"--is the sole context for the emergence of the Christian paradox, then clearly the structure of the absurd cannot be identified with a dialectical synthesis of conceptual opposites, such as occurs in the speculative explanation of the paradox. The absurd presents itself not to a serenely detached speculative thinker, for whom existence is no more than an element within a system of concepts, but to an anguished individual, passionately absorbed in the activity of existing, of reconciling, within actual existence, the contradictions he discovers therein. The absurd commends itself to such an individual as an actual rather than a merely logical, conceptual solution to the problem of existing.

The trouble with the speculative assessment of the paradox is that it dismisses as inessential the very element of subjective, existential need which makes possible the paradox's appearance and conditions its significance. Thus, for speculative thought, the question of the truth of the paradox is removed from the only context in which it can be meaningfully raised, i.e., the context of the finite individual's existential isolation from the Absolute, the context of ethical inwardness and temporal becoming. When the reconciliation of time and eternity in the God-man is treated as essentially a conceptual unity, then this unity has no interest for an exister, no matter how comprehensible to thought the dialectical explanation makes the doctrine of the Incarnation appear.[107] Such an

[106] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 200.

[107] "Christianity is no doctrine concerning the unity of the divine and the human, or concerning the identity of subject and object; nor is it any of the other logical transcriptions of Christianity.

explanation is entirely beside the point, for it treats of an objective content which has no relation to the plight of the despairing exister, and sheds no light upon that existential paradox with which in faith he is decisively concerned. For the existing individual, who is in despair over the possibility of becoming himself within existence, Christ appears as a paradoxical reality, in whose actual existence the contradictory poles of finite and infinite, time and eternity, which "existence holds apart," are absurdly united. This actual overcoming, within existence, of the very contradictions which the ethically-inward subject of Religiousness A has painfully come to understand as irreconcilable, constitutes the significant content of that paradox which this same individual now aspires, through a paradoxical leap of faith, to affirm.

Kierkegaard's complaint that the speculative ideal of explaining the Christian paradox is really intended to remove it, is based upon his fundamental assumption of an "infinite qualitative difference" between the finite individual exister and "the eternal essential truth." Hegel's supposed rational mediation of these radically disparate poles, he contends, involves a refusal to acknowledge either the absolute freedom and transcendence of God, who "needs no man," or the concrete inwardness of the finite spirit, which resists all efforts to transform it into a mere "transient factor"[108] within a speculative system. Of course, if the finite subject and the eternal essential truth are already implicitly related, as Hegel insists, then clearly any paradox that might appear to arise from their conjunction must be a function of faulty intellectual comprehension, which the dialectic, accordingly, can correct. But if, as Kierkegaard asserts, this speculative reassessment of the God/man relationship rests upon a misguided conflation

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If Christianity were a doctrine, the relationship to it would not be one of faith, for only an intellectual type of relationship can correspond to a doctrine. Christianity is therefore not a doctrine, but the fact that God has existed." Kierkegaard, CUP, pp. 290-291.

[108] Ibid., p. 480; see also p. 512: "To transform Christianity speculatively into an eternal history, and the Deity in time into an eternal becoming of the divine, etc., is only an evasion and a play upon words."

of "the absolutely different," then the Christian claim that "God has existed as man" must be viewed as the irreducibly paradoxical--an absurdity further compounded by the finite exister's faith that he can achieve a temporal relationship with this God-man:

> . . . the speculative philosopher explains the paradox so as to remove it, and now in his knowledge knows that it is removed, that the paradox is not the essential relationship that the eternal essential truth bears to an existing individual in the extremity of his existence . . . .[109]

Christianity, in this latter case, is precisely the opposite of speculation, and Christ the paradoxical synthesizer of mutually repellent opposites, rather than, as for Hegel, the dialectically explicable mediator of internally related polarities:

> But what other presupposition can, generally speaking, come into question for a so-called Christian philosophy, but that Christianity is the precise opposite of speculation; that it is the miraculous, the absurd, a challenge to the individual to exist in it, and not to waste his time by trying to understand it speculatively. . . . Here I do not ask whether Christianity is right, but only what Christianity is. Speculative thought leaves out this preliminary inquiry, and that is why it succeeds in mediating. . . . But as soon as a preliminary agreement posits Christianity as the opposite of speculation, mediation becomes ipso facto impossible. . . . But what is the opposite of mediation? It is the absolute paradox.[110]

But although Kierkegaard here strenuously rejects all forms of theoretical explanation, he does not discount the relevance of genuine, existential explanation with respect to this absolute paradox. Keeping in mind his dictum that a "preliminary inquiry" as to what Christianity really is must first be carried out, Kierkegaard points out that to the Christian the paradox signifies a factual, hence contingent, coincidence of mutually repellent realities, rather than a conceptually necessary synthesis of logical opposites. Further, it is crucial to recall who this Christian is, for whom the paradox of the God-man appears irreducibly absurd. For if Christianity is approached by an abstract thinker,

[109] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 203.

[110] Ibid., p. 338.

such as a scientific or historical investigator, it must needs be discounted either as a highly dubitable set of data, or perhaps dismissed altogether as a jumble of logical nonsense.[111] To the speculative thinker, the Christian Incarnation--logically contradictory when approached at the level of abstract understanding--nevertheless yields to the explanatory power of dialectical reason, revealing itself as the sole appropriate content for absolute philosophical knowing. For neither the objective thinker nor the speculative philosopher, in other words, does the Christian paradox remain intractible, since for both, its content and structure can be explained in terms other than itself.

But the illusory satisfaction of such explanations, Kierkegaard insists, is apparent to him to whom the paradox is genuinely and exclusively directed--the ethico-religious individual. For such an exister, the paradox retains its enigmatic status--not because, like the abstract thinker, he finds it logically meaningless, nor because, in contrast to speculative thinkers, he lacks intellectual prowess--but because for him its very existential significance rests upon its paradoxical content and upon the absurd possibility of his achieving an existential relationship to that paradox, simply as such. Unlike the abstract or the speculative thinker, this exister is a subjective thinker, who utilizes his understanding always in the interest of "understanding himself in existence." Thus, whereas the objective thinker suppresses the role of the subject who is engaged upon thinking, and the speculative reasoner argues that the essential element of the subject's act of reflecting can be incorporated without loss of meaning into a higher dialectic synthesis, Kierkegaard contends that the existing thinker alone recognizes the irreducible difficulty of combining existence and reflection, and thus alone is capable of appreciating the corresponding significance, for existence, of an absolutely irreducible, paradoxical "existence-communication":

[111] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 504. "Nonsense therefore he cannot believe against the understanding, for precisely the understanding will discern that it is nonsense and will prevent him from believing it . . . ."

> Existing is ordinarily regarded as no very complex matter . . . but abstract thinking takes rank as an accomplishment. But really to exist, so as to interpenetrate one's existence with consciousness, at one and the same time eternal and as if far removed from existence, and yet also present in existence and in the process of becoming: that is truly difficult. . . . To think existence sub specie aeterni and in abstract terms is essentially to abrogate it, and the merit of the proceeding is like the much trumpeted merit of abrogating the principle of contradiction.[112]

But neither existence nor the principle of contradiction which faithfully reflects the structure of existence can so readily be abrogated by thought, since no subjective individual, unavoidably interested in existing, can lift himself beyond his finite, temporal condition, and exist in a state of disinterested detachment.[113] For this reason, the category of the absurd--which the Christian recognizes as directly addressing the need of an existing subject to realize a God-relationship within existence--must itself reflect the paradoxical structure of existence, rather than explaining that structure away.

There is no positive role then, either for objective understanding or for speculative reason, when it comes to explaining the meaning of the Christian paradox--primarily because, from such detached standpoints, the paradox, as it is actually given to the understanding of the existing subject,[114] does not even become visible. The "meaning" of this paradox discloses itself only to one who exists at the appropriate level of consciousness. Not being a "matter of knowledge,"[115] the Christian existence-communication cannot be classified with the approximative data resulting from logico-scientific analysis, nor equated with the speculative

[112] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 273.

[113] Ibid., p. 280.

[114] Here, Kierkegaard anticipates, in a specific context, the later general phenomenological thesis that there is an essential connection between the subjective (noetic) and objective (noematic) poles of any conscious experience, i.e., the view that a particular "objectivity" only appears and is meaningful, in relationship to a specific modality of subjective apprehension. Although Kierkegaard does not explicitly defend such an interpretation of epistemological issues, his description of the essential relationship between the ethico-religious mode of consciousness and the Christian paradox has a decidedly phenomenological flavor.

[115] Ibid., p. 192.

synthesis which, glossing over the radical disjunction between the elements absurdly conjoined in the Christian paradox, the speculative thinker seeks to identify as its essential content.

When Kierkegaard describes the Christian Incarnation as absurd, therefore, he views this quality as not merely accidental--as it appears to both the abstract and the speculative thinker--but as essentially characterizing its meaning and value for the despairing exister to whom its message is uniquely oriented. In other words, the paradox is significant, precisely qua absurd, only for the ethico-religious subject--for the potential believer who understands it as an absolute stimulus to passionate individual decisiveness, but at the time recognizes that this Christian mode of realizing an existential God-relationship assaults the very foundations of his previous self-understanding.

Kierkegaard asserts that "The paradox is related essentially to man as man"[116]--thus, only the exister, earnestly struggling to "express existentially what [he] has understood about [him]self"[117] and who is therefore guided by the ethical ideal of choosing himself absolutely, can appreciate the hard, indeed absurd, possibility proffered him by the Christian paradox. For not merely the objective understanding, but the ethico-religious, subjective understanding of the existing individual, is "offended" by the message of the Incarnation. The chief absurdity which this exister must confront is not that the Incarnation cannot be objectively comprehended (although this is no doubt the case), but that the subjective thinker himself, to whose self-alienated experience the Christian paradox offers redress, cannot understand its content, except negatively:

> . . . in connection with the absolute paradox, the only understanding possible is that it cannot be understood.[118]

This negative explanation, however, represents the crucial culminative stage of subjective thought, rather than a result obtainable

116 Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 502. [Emphasis mine.]

117 Ibid., p. 315.

118 Ibid., p. 195.

through any objective mode of consciousness, for which the paradox, in its genuine significance, remains inaccessible:

> What does it mean in general to explain anything? Does it consist in showing that the obscure something in question is not this but something else? This would be a strange sort of an explanation; I thought it was the function of an explanation to render it evident that the something in question was this definite thing, so that the explanation took the obscurity away but not the object. Otherwise the explanation would not be an explanation, but something quite different, namely a correction.[119]

On the basis of this clarification of what a genuine explanation of any object would entail, Kierkegaard goes on to indicate how an authentic explanation of the Absolute paradox should proceed:

> An explanation of the paradox makes it clear what the paradox is, removing any obscurity remaining; a correction takes the paradox away, and makes it clear that there is no paradox.[120]

To explain the paradox objectively is an impossibility, since any such positive analysis leaves out of account the very relationship between the existing individual and the eternal truth which forms the substance of the paradox:

> But if the paradox arises from putting the eternal and an existing particular human being into relation with one another, when the speculative explanation takes the paradox away, does the explanation also take existence away from the existing individual?[121]

In contrast to such objective approaches to existence, "Christianity on the contrary is subjective," and from that subjective standpoint within which Christianity arises, arises also the despairing subjective understanding which constitutes a genuine explanation of the absolute paradox--the recognition that its message is a paradox which surpasses all forms of understanding, and can only be grasped decisively through faith:

> The existing individual must feel himself a sinner, not objectively, which is nonsense, but subjectively, which is the most profound suffering. With all the strength of

119 Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 196.

120 Ibid.

121 Ibid.

> his mind, to the last thought . . . he must try to understand the forgiveness of sins, and then despair of the understanding. With the understanding directly opposed to it, the inwardness of faith must lay hold of the paradox; and precisely this struggle on the part of faith . . . constitutes the tension of inwardness.[122]

In Kierkegaard's "phenomenology of existential becoming,"[123] the Christian paradox turns out to be the only object which is not susceptible to rational explanation of some kind--and so truly corresponds to the passionately decisive condition of belief:

> Anything that is almost probable, or probable, or extremely and emphatically probable, is something the individual can almost know, or extremely and emphatically almost know--but it is impossible to believe. For the absurd is the object of faith, and the only object that can be believed.[124]

Faith is thus a response which he distinguishes radically from all forms of intellectual apprehension, including the ethico-religious thinking of the authentic exister. It becomes a possibility only for the individual who, seeking a God-relationship, has exhausted all purely human, immanent possibilities. The most important function of the dialectical movements or Religiousness A--wherein the exister strives to actualize himself through free self-choosing/understanding, as a unity of temporal and eternal, finite and infinite, and discovers in the course of this process that, for

[122] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 201.

[123] "The mode of apprehension of the truth is precisely the truth. It is therefore untrue to answer a question in a medium in which the question cannot arise." Ibid., p. 287. Here one has an indication of the phenomenological approach implicit in Kierkegaard's existentialism. His complex descriptions of the dialectical movements generated within existential becoming are linked by his insistence that, while the "how" of subjective apprehension is crucial, the existing subject is not condemned to an arbitrary subjectivism, since to every "how"--i.e., to each specific mode of subjective apprehension--there corresponds a uniquely determined "what," which emerges only in conjunction with that level of subjective awareness capable of recognizing and appropriating it. Faith, then, is not a watered-down intellectualism, but a "sphere all by itself" (ibid., p. 291), with its own uniquely appropriate content.

[124] Ibid., p. 189.

so long as he exists he remains radically self-alienated and isolated from the divine--is to enable him to reach the point where the most existentially meaningful act available is to reject the lessons of this dialectic of self-understanding, and decisively to affirm the paradoxical possibility of becoming himself through the agency of an absurd temporal relation with God-in-time:

> The dialectical aspect of the problem requires thought passion--not to want to understand it, but to understand what it means to break thus with the understanding and with thinking and with immanence, in order to lose the last foothold of immanence, eternity behind one, and to exist constantly on the extreme verge of existence by virtue of the absurd.[125]

Such an absurd possibility can only be believed, against the understanding, because it contradicts the authentic exister's apprehension of himself as a radically free individual, for whom the self-sustaining inwardness of "the ethical alone is certain."

It is now evident that if the risk of faith is the greatest risk open to an existing individual, this is not because it involves a leap from the security of objective understanding to the uncertainty of a subjective perspective. The individual who chooses to believe against the understanding does not, through that choice, risk the loss of his objective certainty--that, he already holds in abeyance, through persistent ethical self-affirmation. The will to believe arises only for an exister who is already a subject, striving to resist the "illusion of finality," and who, furthermore, has carried his ethical commitment to subjective becoming to its extreme limits. When this individual turns his interest toward the Christian paradox, what he places at risk, therefore, is his subjective understanding of himself as one for whom the pursuit of concrete, ethical freedom is a self-justifying starting-point and goal. The "crucifixion of the understanding"[126] which is the condition of the possibility of faith, then, refers primarily to the negation, which faith paradoxically demands, of the finite subject's hard-won existential understanding of himself as the sole ground and agent

[125] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 505.

[126] Ibid., p. 500.

of his individual self-realization--an understanding which now must be cast aside, if the message of the Christian existence-communication is to be taken seriously.

As long as an exister holds that any dialectical solution within immanence--even the ethico-religious solution of Religion A--is conceivable, he is not ready for faith, the "category of decision."[127] Even the despairingly sin-conscious individual, for whom the hope of self-redemption has been annulled, still possesses only the conditions for the decision: he must yet make that final "absolute venture," abandoning, as it were, himself, in order to "become another":

> . . . the contradiction is a new expression for the fact that existence is paradoxically accentuated; for if there is any vestige of immanence, an eternal determinant left in the exister--then it is not possible. The exister must have lost continuity with himself, must have become another (not different from himself within himself), and then, by receiving the condition from the Deity, he must have become a new creature.[128]

When the exister makes this unmediated leap to faith, what he risks is the previously unassailable priority of the ideal of immanent ethical self-realization. There is no logical, or objective, uncertainty to the category of the absurd; indeed, it is certain, both to the abstract thinker and to the existential, subjective thinker, that the possibility embodied in the Christian Incarnation is absurd. Thus, the risk facing the Christian believer is not equivalent to that confronting Socrates, for whom the objective uncertainty surrounding the question of God's existence provoked the deepest inwardness. For the Christian, the uncertainty surrounding the category of the absurd arises at a more richly determined level of subjective experience. It is not objective uncertainty which stimulates the believer's decision, but rather a profound existential uncertainty, as to whether or not such a

[127] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 91.

[128] Ibid., p. 510. This "new creature" is an individual no longer guilty, alienated, and cut off by sin from the absolute--as he discovers himself to be through the process of immanent self-reflection--but instead united, per impossibile, with the absolute otherness of the Divine.

paradoxical reality as the God-man indeed constitutes an existential solution to the contradictions of finite existence. The sinful exister, in other words, risks abandoning the sphere of immanent self-certainty, of authentic ethico-religious activity, for the infinitely uncertain prospect of achieving self-realization through a paradoxical commitment to the contingent existence and freedom of another.

From within immanence, there can be no understanding such a possibility; thus, it demands of the exister the greatest possible degree of decisiveness, since it makes the ethically absurd demand that he give up the secure standpoint of free, ethical becoming, of subjective self-certainty--the very standpoint in and through which the quest for an authentic God-relationship is rooted and has reached its full existential articulation.

Thus, the Christian existence-communication is absurd because it contradicts the primary existential precept upon which all ethico-religious activity has been founded--i.e., that from the point of view of existence, "The ethical reality of the individual is only reality."[129] This precept maintains that the sole content to which any exister can sustain a real relationship, and therefore the sole content of ethical activity, is the self in its inwardness. The exister is related directly only to his own inwardness, which is the only content not transformed through thought into a mere existence-possibility. Into this latter category fall not only all empirical objects, all intellectual doctrines and concepts, but also even--indeed, particularly--the ethical reality of other existers, to whose reality an exister "stands related only by way of thought":[130]

> . . . there is no immediate relationship, ethically, between subject and subject. When I understand another person, his reality is for me a possibility, and in its aspect of possibility this conceived reality is related to precisely as the thought of something I have not done is related to the doing of it.[131]

129 Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 291.

130 Ibid., pp. 295-296.

131 Ibid., p. 285.

All acts of existential value, then, have the self, in its subjective, ethical inwardness, as their object, and self-understanding and appropriation as their goal. The Christian paradox, however, demands that the exister make an existentially self-contradictory use of his subjective freedom, because it requires him to "ask with infinite interest about a reality which is not his own."[132] Obviously, "reality" here must not be taken in the sense of empirical, objective reality; rather, it refers to the existential inwardness of another individual--that very inwardness about which "it is unethical to ask"![133] If an individual, despite his ethical understanding of the integrity of other individuals, persists in "trying to establish a relationship to this reality as a reality," and not simply as a possibility, then he can do so only paradoxically, through faith:

> To ask, with infinite interest, about a reality which is not one's own, is faith, and this constitutes a paradoxical relationship to the paradoxical.[134]

It is now clear that the paradoxical quality of Christianity is not simply the product of a traditional conflict between detached, rational understanding and irrational, subjective belief. Faith arises when the existing subject discovers that the need for a God-relationship--developed and clarified through subjective reflection--can only be satisfied if he is now willing to annul the primary role of his own subjective freedom and affirm the existentially absurd notion that ethical self-realization depends for its enactment upon the contingent, historical existence of another individual:

> . . . faith is a sphere for itself which, paradoxically distinguished from the aesthetic and metaphysical, accentuates existence, and paradoxically distinguished from the ethical, accentuates the existence of another, not one's own existence.[135]

[132] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 288.

[133] Ibid., p. 287.

[134] Ibid., p. 288.

[135] Ibid., p. 514.

Having fully understood that self-realization through an existential God-relationship is an ethical impossibility, the exister confronts the figure of the Incarnate God, in whom the radical discontinuities of finite and infinite, time and eternity, nevertheless appear as paradoxically united. He is invited to believe--against his own ethical self-understanding--that through an absurd temporal relationship with this paradigmatic individual, Christ, the "teacher" in whose actual existence the ethical requirement of self-unity through unity with the Divine is paradoxically realized, he can hope for the impossible: "Faith is essentially this--to hold fast to possibility."[136]

> The object of faith is the reality of the teacher, that the teacher really exists. . . . The object of faith is hence the reality of the God-man in the sense of existence. . . . The maximum of attainment within the sphere of faith is to become infinitely interested in the reality of the teacher.[137]

Only through such paradoxical faith, Kierkegaard contends, can the self-alienation and isolation from the Absolute, which the exercise of existential freedom intensifies rather than heals, possibly be overcome within time:

> Faith . . . is the anticipation of the eternal, which holds the elements together, the discontinuities of existence. If an existing person does not have faith, then [for him] God neither is nor is God present . . . .[138]

And yet, the possibility of a temporal God-relationship, and hence of self-unity, remains--even for the faithful believer who makes the leap and persists in it--an absolute paradox, an absurdity. Faith represents the "anticipation of the eternal"--it is not eternal happiness itself. Because the believer is a temporal being, the certainty he experiences in faith is not secure, achieved once and for all, and enabling him to leave behind the strife of finite becoming. Rather, the efforts of the Christian believer to maintain himself at the standpoint of faith require the

136 SKJP, II, p. 13, #1126.

137 Kierkegaard, CUP, pp. 290-291. [Emphases mine.]

138 SKJP, II, p. 97, #1347.

utmost perseverance, since at every moment he must hold in abeyance his own ethical self-certainty, in order to align himself with the existentially absurd reality of Christ. Although in the precise instant of congruity between himself and the God-man, "the absurd is not the absurd--faith transforms it,"[139] given the nature of temporal becoming, the instant is surpassed in its very realization, so that the will to affirm the absurd, against all understanding, remains the central mark of faith. "The passion of faith is the only thing which masters the absurd . . ."[140]--but again, passion is generated, as we have seen, only insofar as the absurd is acknowledged as absurd, immune to all efforts at transforming it into a kind of knowledge. Thus, although passion may "master the absurd," i.e., achieve for the exister a momentary direct relationship to the eternal truth, the absurd nevertheless remains absurd, otherwise the believer's infinite passionate interest would evaporate, and along with it the "anticipation of the eternal" which is the substance of faith.

The absurd and faith, therefore, "are inseparables."[141] The category of the absurd is the category of "courage and of enthusiasm,"[142] so that even for the genuine believer there is no temporal resolution to the mystery of the Absolute Paradox. Indeed, the believer, like the ethical subject, must constantly resist the temptation to suppose that, through existing in inwardness, he has access to some privileged insight into the nature of the object of his belief:

> [A definition of faith, that is of the Christian conception of faith.]
> What is it to believe? It is to will . . . to defend onself against the vain thought of wanting to comprehend and against the vain imagination of being able to comprehend.[143]

[139] SKJP, I, p. 7, #10.

[140] Ibid.

[141] Ibid.

[142] Ibid.

[143] Ibid., II, p. 14, #1130.

This matter, too, however, is a point of dispute among recent commentators. In their zeal to defend Kierkegaard against charges of irrationalism, some interpreters undermine the force of his anti-idealist position, by suggesting that once the existing individual attains the state of belief, the absurdity of the paradox disappears. This is the view, for instance, of Alastair McKinnon, who remarks that

> "Rightly understood" the absurd or the paradox is not at all intellectually terrifying: it is not a plea for absurdity or irrationalism. It can be mastered; it can be transformed so that it is no longer absurd. The believer is not committed to a life of permanent and incorrigible self-contradiction.[144]

According to McKinnon, only during "the process of coming to believe" is the Christian paradox absurd; once the state of belief[145] is reached, and the absurd therefore mastered, the believer is liberated from self-contradiction.

This view, however, rests upon a failure to recognize that for Kierkegaard there can be no state of fully accomplished inwardness within existence; in other words, that "coming to believe," for a finite, temporal individual, precisely is belief. Thus, faith, in Kierkegaard's view, is always a "martyrdom of endurance"[146] tied essentially to the passionate affirmation of the absurd qua absurd.

Another current commentator, John W. Elrod, also suggests that "For faith, the paradox is not absurd,"[147] meaning by this that it is not arbitrary, but subjectively meaningful, for an exister to risk himself in making the leap of faith. One must take care, as Elrod does not, however, not to allow this valid point, which recognizes that the absurd possibility of the leap has a dialectical foundation in the ethical quest for selfhood, to obscure Kierkegaard's insistence that the leap is thus "subjectively meaningful" precisely

[144] Alastair McKinnon, "Kierkegaard: 'Paradox' and Irrationalism," in Essays on Kierkegaard, ed., Jerry H. Gill (Minneapolis, Minn.: Burgess Publishing Company, 1969), pp. 102-112. See p. 110.

[145] Ibid., p. 109.

[146] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 496.

[147] Elrod, Being and Existence in Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Works, p. 235.

because the paradox, even for the believer, remains irrevocably absurd.

The individual believer, unable to transcend existence, and so unable to achieve an "eternal certainty" regarding his God-relationship, "must rest content with a militant certainty,"[148] achieved in the ceaseless struggle to affirm the paradoxical temporal existence of the God-man, in whom the antinomies of existence are held together. The appearance of Christ, in the role of "mediator," is thus not a consoling signal to the individual that the tensions of temporal becoming are now resolved; in fact, from the point of view of the existing subject, " . . . the very existence of the mediator constitutes the greatest difficulty of all,"[149] since the absurd appearance of the God-man challenges the very ground of ethico-religious "security"--of negative freedom and self-certainty--upon which the quest for an "absolute relation to the Absolute" has thus far been pursued. The believer is thus confronted with a radical decision: either, he can remain at the standpoint of ethico-religious immanence, and courageously accept the self-division and alienation from the "eternal essential truth" to which even authentic existence is heir; or he can adopt an even more passionately courageous standpoint, by affirming, with paradoxical faith, the redemptive power and possibility of a relationship with the absurd reality of the Incarnate God. Like all existential choices, the leap of faith, even though it is the most radical, highest form of subjective expression possible, is a temporal decision, which therefore must constantly be renewed. Its distinguishing feature, therefore, is not that it alone enables the exister to transcend temporal finitude, achieving peace through a certain apprehension of the eternal truth--but rather that it alone enables him, within time, to hope for that which existence renders impossible: self-fulfillment, through an "absolute relationship to the Absolute."

Although Elrod holds that faith represents an existential, rather than a philosophical or even intellectual solution to the

148 Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 203.

149 Ibid., p. 384.

dilemmas of existence, he draws a sharper and more rigid distinction than seems warrantable between ethical existence, in which "the tension within the self is never reconciled,"[150] and religious faith, where "the certainty of self-seeking is transformed into the truth of possession."[151] Such an interpretation of faith and the leap is not consistent with Kierkegaard's repeated allusions to the certainty of faith as incorporating dialectically the element of uncertainty, so that at best faith offers a "militant certainty," a "martyrdom of endurance." In faith, the believer is not at peace, but rather

> Faith is this very dialectical suspension which is continually in fear and trembling and yet never despairs; faith is precisely this infinite self-concern which keeps me awake in risking everything.[152]

Elrod's conclusions may be traceable to his somewhat Hegelian interpretation of Kierkegaard's existential dialectic, the movements of which, he argues, at least imply the possibility of a Christian philosophy based upon the realization, reached through following the path of ethical becoming, that "the self and God require each other in order to exist."[153] This is something, however, which Kierkegaard vehemently rejects, insisting that true Christian self-understanding is founded on the recognition that "God needs no man."[154] Such a conflation of the Divine and human, he contends, is inimical both to existential self-realization and to the proper dignity of God. The paradoxicality of the God/man relationship, founded on their absolute difference, must be preserved, he insists, against all attempts to render the relationship in any sense "dialectically necessary."

[150] Elrod, Being and Existence in Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Works, p. 255.

[151] Ibid., p. 256.

[152] SKJP, I, p. 108, #255.

[153] Elrod, Being and Existence, p. 258.

[154] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 122.

6. The Risk of Faith

The tortured course of the existential dialectic has now culminated in the absolutely paradoxical "either/or" of Christian faith. The believer has in common with the ethical exister the goal of achieving concrete individuality through an absolute relationship with the Absolute. Yet, in pursuit of that ultimate existential possibility, he now finds himself confronting a choice which, even--indeed, particularly--from the perspective of ethical inwardness, is manifestly absurd. Either: he can continue to choose himself--i.e., to live as an ethically self-certain individual, actualizing within time the standpoint of subjective freedom. But, while such activity truly expresses the dynamic of existential becoming, the consequences of such a choice are dire, for the exister who so chooses himself thereby is condemned to a limbo of unfilfilled aspiration. Through willing to be himself, the ethical exister must accept that to be existentially free is to be radically separated from God. In choosing himself, therefore, he equally chooses to deny the possibility of an absolute relationship to the Absolute--of eternal happiness, the very ideal which has guided and oriented the ceaseless striving of existence. Or: the exister can throw into question his ethical understanding of himself as infinitely striving, free subjectivity, by choosing to affirm the reality of Christ, the God-man, as the ground of his own individual self-realization. From the perspective of existence, however, this second choice is no more palatable than the former, since while here, hope is held out for eternal happiness (for an absolute relationship to the Absolute), it appears that the price of the God-relationship is the dissipation of the individual's ethical will to self-certainty, to free individual becoming, within the absolute freedom and existence of Another. The ethical exister, bent upon maintaining himself, in the full concretion of his individual freedom, through an absolute God-relationship, might be forgiven for regarding this price not simply as high, but as absurd. For surely, if part of what it means, existentially, to have an absolute relationship with the Absolute, is that the exister preserves himself,

precisely qua finite subjectivity, within the relationship, then does not the relationship lose its absolute character if it is realizable only through the abandonment of subjective freedom?

This, then, is the crux of the dilemma facing the potential believer: either choose oneself in one's freedom, but lose all hope of self-fulfillment through an absolute God-relationship, or choose to identify oneself with the freedom and reality of the Incarnate God, but thereby risk the loss of subjective freedom and reality, and so of that very existential inwardness which values and aspires to an absolute God-relationship. Neither of these alternatives appears to offer the individual the means to that concrete selfhood which he needs. For an absolute God-relationship to be realized, both moments--i.e., that of individual, infinitely striving freedom, and the independent freedom and reality of God, the absolute Other--must be preserved. Thus it seems that from the point of view of existence, neither choice is coherent.

And yet, the exister confronting this ultimate either/or is not without resources. The deepest lesson of the existential dialectic has been that in order to know himself, the exister must become himself--he must continuously choose himself, decisively, passionately, and in the face of every uncertainty. If he has truly appropriated this lesson, the individual faced with the challenge of Christianity recognizes in it not an abrogation of this original quest for self-certainty, but the sole possibility of its fulfillment. The final question confronting an individual in the extremity of existence is "Why make a leap of faith?"--a leap which offers no assurance of self-realization, but through which, in fact, the exister risks the loss of selfhood. Why should anyone whose aim is the potentiation of existential freedom and individuality choose such a dangerous path?

The clue to understanding the religious exister's response to this question lies in appreciating the full significance of the notion of risk in the context of existential problems. The individual facing the challenge of the Christian paradox is an exister--a being who comes to understand himself through choosing himself decisively at all junctures of temporal becoming. Thus, even when the possibility of the leap to faith in a transcendent reality

presents itself as the unique answer to the problem of existence, he cannot look beyond his existential situation for guidance in choosing, but must look within himself for the grounds of this final decision. Although the alternative to the leap--to exist as a permanently "unhappy consciousness" cut off by its own actions from union with the Absolute--provides no access to eternal happiness, at least in such a choice the unhappy exister can remain secure in the certainty of his own ethical inwardness. The leap to faith in the God-man, on the other hand, proposes that the exister place himself, qua free subjectivity, at risk--affirming the paradoxical possibility that by taking this existentially absurd step he will in fact achieve an absolute God-relationship and so regain and fulfill himself as self-certain, concrete individuality.

But what grounds are there within existence itself for taking a decision which places existence in jeopardy? For an exister to choose to bind himself to the reality of Another, in order thereby to save himself as free subjectivity, is surely to contradict the very basis of existential activity. Yet, if he has genuinely understood what it is to exist as free subjectivity, the individual who takes such a risk apprehends that the leap of faith alone enables him to actualize the most profound possibilities inherent in the standpoint of subjective freedom.

The movements of the existential dialectic, as we have seen, have been negative, requiring of the individual that through choosing himself as ethically-inward subjectivity, he recognize an ever-deepening distinction between himself and the divine Other. The more clearly he draws this distinction, the more profound is the anguish of the exister, who in the interest of expressing the truth of subjectivity through asserting an absolute God-relationship, finds himself the architect of his own self-abnegation and isolation from the Absolute. And yet, the despairing exister recognizes also that even this terrible knowledge of the radically negative quality of subjective existence is an indirect, dialectical verification of the potency and authentic existential truth of subjective freedom, which is determined to express/know/choose itself at any cost, even that of self-destruction:

> Basically the situation is such that if a person does not first use all the power given him against himself, thereby

> destroying himself, he is either a dolt or a coward in spite of all his courage. The power which is given to man (in possibility) is altogether dialectical, and the only true expression for a true understanding of himself in possibility is precisely that he has the power to destroy himself.[155]

This will to self-realization through decisive self-negation is not fully articulated even at the point where, in despair, the sin-conscious exister concedes the irreducible distinction between himself and God, the finite subject's essential Other. For there remains one final context within which the individual can actualize that radical negative freedom which is subjective existence. The leap of faith confronts the exister with the paradoxical possibility of absolute self-realization through absolute self-abandonment--i.e., through the denial of the power and primacy of subjective freedom itself. The prospective believer, then, encounters the most extreme risk conceivable for an exister; and yet, if the message of the existential dialectic is heeded, it appears that, by acting with the absolutely passionate decisiveness which could only be generated by risking the loss of subjective freedom, the exister who makes the leap discovers the key to full existential selfhood.

In other words, far from being an abandonment of the foundations of existential selfhood, the decision to make the leap of faith--and thereby risk the loss of that subjective freedom in the interests of which the leap is undertaken--is in fact the highest possible dialectical expression of subjective inwardness and freedom. There is no objective, nor even any existential support for the belief that the leap of faith will indeed unite those radical opposites which, the individual well knows, existence so forcefully holds apart. Yet precisely this absolute uncertainty determines the value of the leap. Sensitive as the ethically-inward exister now is to the dialectical significance of existential freedom, he appreciates that only an absolute act of freedom can facilitate such a paradoxical unification. Thus, while to make the leap of faith in one sense is to risk everything--to defy all the precepts of both objective and existential self-knowing, casting one's very

[155] SKJP, I, p. 19, #46.

freedom into the abyss--yet, in a deeper dialectical sense, an individual who has appropriated the full import of the dialectical stages of his own existential becoming, and so is aware of the irreducible link between concrete self-unity and freedom, sees in the leap a unique opportunity for realizing himself as fully potentiated subjectivity. For one adequately instructed by existence itself, the leap represents not an arbitrary, groundless defiance of all certainties, but the concrete fulfillment of the deepest intentions of existential becoming. The ethico-religious, subjective meaning of the leap is apparent, before the leap is taken, although this understanding of its "necessity" does nothing to mitigate the risk involved, a risk predicated upon the possibility of achieving an existentially absurd union with the Incarnate God.

It was argued earlier that the element of risk which makes the leap of faith existentially significant is not determined by the objective absurdity of the content of belief.[156] This interpretation conflicts with that of some commentators, who see the subjective passion generated by the risk of faith as directly commensurable with the degree of "objective uncertainty" accompanying it. This is the view, for instance, of Arthur E. Murphy, who regards the leap as the response of a disappointed rationalist who, while still "profoundly bothered about the objective truth of faith,"[157] is willing to risk the "objectively absurd," the "rationally incredible"[158] affirmation of the reality of Christ. Such views, however, do not treat with sufficient attention Kierkegaard's insistence that the potential believer is already necessarily a subjective thinker, for whom objective problems and their objective resolution occupy a subordinate position on the scale of human concerns. For such an exister, the risk of faith is not bound up with a forlorn hope that somehow, indirectly, we can attain to an objective apprehension of the truth of Christianity,

[156] See this chapter, section 5, pp. 318-322.

[157] Arthur E. Murphy, "On Kierkegaard's Claim That 'Truth is Subjectivity,'" in Essays on Kierkegaard, ed., Jerry H. Gill, pp. 94-104. See p. 98.

[158] Ibid., p. 96.

of the Paradox. Rather it is based on the realization that even for an authentically inward subject, the risk of faith is absolute.

Nevertheless, before he enacts it, the potential believer must apprehend the leap of faith at least as subjectively (i.e., ethico-religiously) meaningful--which would seem to diminish the risk he confronts when considering the leap. How can it be, one might ask, that despite the facts that the leap neither opposes objective understanding directly, nor confronts the exister with a subjectively arbitrary decision, Kierkegaard persists in referring to the leap as an ultimate risk? What can be the focus and content of the leap, such that this characterization remains tenable? And if, even after the leap is made, faith remains a "militant certainty"[159] only, from which the aspect of risk is never eliminated, either by means of some speculative explanation of the paradox, or through subjective considerations, then how is the truth of subjectivity ever realized in such a leap?

The problem might be approached by arguing that the risk confronting the potential believer is due to his uncertainty that the proposed leap indeed <u>is</u> subjectively meaningful, but that after making it, the ethico-religious meaning (i.e., subjective truth) of the leap becomes apparent to him, and the paradox is apprehended therefore as no longer absurd. This is the line taken, for instance, by J. Heywood Thomas.[160] Thomas bases his position on an interpretation of Kierkegaard's contention that not just <u>any</u> absurdity can be the object of faith, but only the Christian Paradox. But whereas, it seems to me, for Kierkegaard this means that, <u>prior</u> to the leap, the paradox must already be recognized as the sole possible resolution to the existential dilemma, Thomas understands by it that the Paradox is " . . . an absurd that must be true. It must make sense when we have believed."[161] It was argued earlier[162]

[159] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 203; see also Kierkegaard, <u>Philosophical Fragments</u>, pp. 135-136, " . . . for a faith that celebrates its triumph is the most ridiculous thing conceivable. . . . Faith is always militant."

[160] J. Heywood Thomas, <u>Subjectivity and Paradox</u> (Oxford: Basil Blackwood, 1959).

[161] Ibid., p. 133.

[162] See this chapter, section 5, p. 328.

that such an emphasis upon a post-leap state of existential certitude fails to take account of Kierkegaard's insistence that faith is faith only in and through its relationship to the absurd--so that even for the committed believer, there is never, within time, final enlightenment regarding the nature of the content of belief. To be sure, Thomas does not regard this new understanding as arising from any objective or speculative explanation of the Paradox, but rather from an apprehension of its ethico-religious usefulness:

> Once on the other side . . . of the leap . . . we see the meaningfulness and truth of the absurd so that it is no longer for us the absurd. This meaning and truth is what we have seen the Paradox involves, namely its ethico-religious use.[163]

But even if one regards the truth of the Paradox as resting in a final recognition of its existential significance, this seems to contradict Kierkegaard's view that faith is a perpetual striving for mastery of the absurd, precisely qua absurd. Furthermore, if existential truth and the ethico-religious use of the Paradox are equatable, as Thomas suggests, then it would appear that "subjective meaningfulness" cannot serve as the motivating factor which encourages the exister to seek subjective truth through making the leap. If ethico-religious use is subjective truth, and if therefore both arise after the leap has been enacted, then one must conclude that the grounds for making the leap are entirely arbitrary, since only after the leap can the exister realize the Paradox's ethico-religious meaning. But if this is so, then what can the exister who decides upon the leap possibly be risking, when, in advance, at least, the Paradox does not stand out as exacting any unique sacrifice from its adherents? Unless the Paradox is already subjectively meaningful, and unless part of this meaning is the risk its affirmation entails, then the would-be believer seems to be forced into the ludicrous procedure of experimentally selecting a series of candidates for the role of Absolute Paradox, and blindly affirming each of these arbitrary choices in turn, every time taking the calculated risk that this leap will be the one to be rewarded by the certain recognition of its ethico-religious usefulness.

[163] Thomas, Subjectivity and Paradox, p. 133.

Kierkegaard, however, insists any such calculated risk is not a genuine risk at all, and so has nothing in common with the "absolute venture" undertaken by a believer.

In view of these considerations, it seems that one must accept that the Paradox's subjective meaning, its ethico-religious usefulness, is a precondition, rather than a result of the leap--and that as such, it cannot be equated with the subjective truth which actually making the leap enables the exister to realize. Even if ethico-religious meaning were to be reinforced as a consequence of the leap, this could never lead the believer to a condition of complete subjective understanding of the Paradox. Although only the Christian paradox addresses the concerns of the finite subject (i.e., concerns regarding the possibility of fully potentiating his subjectivity within existential becoming), so that only a leap to faith in the God-man is ethico-religiously meaningful and useful, this does not imply that either before or following the leap the element of risk is eradicated. Rather, the absurdity of the Paradox, and of the leap which affirms it, remains unaltered. The truth of subjectivity is thus a continuing product of the exister's persistent striving to reaffirm the ethico-religious meaning of the absurd qua absurd, by repeatedly placing at risk his own radical individual freedom.[164]

It has been asserted throughout this study that Kierkegaard defends the standpoint of subjectivity from charges that it is a mere arbitrary subjective fanaticism by insisting that the standpoint of faith--the highest mode of subjective inwardness--depends for its realization upon a specific content, the Christian Paradox:

> . . . to believe is specifically different from all other appropriation and inwardness. Faith is the objective uncertainty due to the repulsion of the absurd held fast by the passion of inwardness, which in this instance is intensified to the utmost degree. This formula fits only the believer . . . simply and solely the believer who is related to the Absolute Paradox.[165]

[164] "Christianity is an existence-communication which makes existence paradoxical and remains paradoxical as long as one exists, and only eternity possesses the explanation . . . ." Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 499.

[165] Ibid., p. 540.

It appears, therefore, that while the highest truth of subjectivity is the absolute passion of faith, this response arises solely in relationship to a specific "what," such that the non-arbitrary truth of the standpoint is guaranteed by its essential connection with a particular, albeit paradoxical, ontological claim. Yet, despite Kierkegaard's deep reliance upon the Christian paradox in this context, it is crucial to remember the fundamental goal of the existential dialectic, of which the standpoint of faith is the culmination. Its central and sole aim is the full potentiation of subjective existence, or freedom:

> This must constantly be borne in mind, namely, that the subjective problem is not something about an objective issue, but is the subjectivity itself.[166]

Even though faith is distinguishable from ethical inwardness by its paradoxical interest in the reality of Another, this specific orientation is meaningful only because of the ethical exister's infinite interest in fully potentiating his own subjective inwardness. True, the exister discovers that he can only become a fully potentiated subject through passionately abandoning himself to the reality of Another--but that Other comes into focus only as a result of the ethical individual's strenuous effort to become himself. Its determinate existential significance is thus as the ultimate challenge to the freedom and self-certainty of the developing subjectivity of the ethical individual. Its role is to fully potentiate existential inwardness--not to lift the finite exister beyond it:

> . . . Christianity . . . desires that the subject should be infinitely concerned about himself.[167]

In other words, while the ethically-inward individual realizes himself only in faith--and, further, only when the focus of this faith is the absolute paradox of Christianity--the essential content and terminus for this existentially unique act of appropriation is not the absurd reality of the God-man, but rather the individual

[166] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 115.

[167] Ibid., p. 116; see also p. 55, "Christianity . . . proposes to intensify subjectivity to the utmost . . . ."

subject's free relationship to that reality. In the leap of faith, the exister does not affirm simply the transcendent and redemptive reality of the Absolute Paradox; the primary content of his faith is the persistent affirmation of his capacity, in the face of irreducible uncertainty, freely to establish and sustain a paradoxical relationship to the absurd:

> The subjective problem concerns the relationship of the individual to Christianity.[168]

Even if the "how" of Christianity is intrinsically connected with a specific "what," it remains the "how" which is of vital importance in realizing the truth of individual existence. Indeed, it is the "how" which alone bestows paradoxical truth upon the content of the absolute paradox, for seen from the standpoint of a consciousness not yet motivated by the need for subjective self-realization, the Christian content appears only as an objective absurdity, and not also as the unique path to selfhood.

Faith may be uniquely oriented toward the paradoxical reality of Christ, rather than, as in the earlier stages of the dialectic, toward the reality of personal ethical inwardness. Nevertheless, the very notion of the God-man as the absolute paradox--i.e., the existential, free holding together of the absolute contraries of finite and infinite, of temporal and eternal--itself becomes meaningful only as the unique means to resolving the exister's ethical dilemma. The faith of the exister is not ultimately directed toward the transcendent reality of the One in whom this dilemma is paradigmatically resolved; rather, existential faith is a faith in faith itself--an "absolute venture" in which the existing subject risks relying upon the power of his own subjective freedom--which the entire existential dialectic has called radically into question--to draw to himself the unifying reality of the Christian paradox:

> The relationship to Christ is this--a person tests for himself whether Christ is everything to him, and then says, I put everything into this. But I cannot get an immediate certainty about my relationship to Christ. I cannot get an immediate certainty about whether I have

168 Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 20.

> faith, for to have faith is the very dialectical suspension which is continually in fear and trembling and yet never despairs; faith is precisely this infinite self-concern which keeps awake in risking everything, this self-concern about whether one really has faith--and precisely this self-concern is faith.[169]

While faith may challenge the individual to leap beyond the limits of immanent self-understanding and self-choosing--to affirm the reality of an absolutely transcendent Other, in whom the contradictions of existence are resolved--yet he aspires to such transcendence always in the service of fulfilling his own absolutely irreducible, unquestionable interest in potentiating the fullness of finite subjectivity.

Thus, the existential dialectic comes to its fruition not when the exister halts before that which radically transcends finite subjectivity, but rather when, in fear and trembling, he takes the absolute risk of believing himself capable of achieving, within subjective becoming, an absolute relationship to Transcendence. The individual exists in truth not when he discovers the ground of his own existence in Transcendence, but when he at last experiences himself as absolute subjective freedom, radically other than the Divine, yet validating this extreme inwardness and isolation through the constantly renewed appropriation of the Absolute Paradox.

Kierkegaard singles out Christianity as the "absolute religion" on the grounds that it alone--and not abstract understanding or speculative reason--truly addresses the needs of the isolated, existing individual, first through enabling him fully to realize his absolute distinction from God in sin-consciousness,[170] and then by offering him, in the leap of faith, the possibility of overcoming that radical distinction. But it is clearly not absolute in the sense of providing clarification of the meaning and limits of subjective becoming itself: this the exister himself accomplishes through the stages of the existential dialectic, and indeed only approaches Christianity as the Absolute Religion when this becomes subjectively necessary as a propaedeutic to the fulfillment of the

[169] SKJP, I, p. 108, #255. [Emphasis mine.]

[170] Ibid., p. 19, #46.

ethical ideal. Christian faith therefore remains, in the end, a means, albeit an "absolute" means, to the realization of an ideal which itself, however, is regarded as an absolute--i.e., the irreducible and self-justifying goal of securing absolute individual self-certainty, absolute existential freedom, paradoxically expressed within the context of finite, temporal becoming.

Chapter Nine

The Limits of Kierkegaardian Inwardness

> The Christian heroism . . . is to venture wholly to be oneself, as an individual man, this definite individual man, alone before the face of God, alone in this tremendous exertion and tremendous responsibility . . . .
>
> Søren Kierkegaard, The Sickness Unto Death (preface)

It is now clear that Kierkegaard's philosophical work defines itself throughout as a revolutionary response to the claims to metaphysical knowledge made by traditional thinkers. This radical critique of the tradition culminates in his description of the dialectic whereby the finite individual encounters the Absolute Paradox of Christianity. The movements of this existential dialectic constitute a sustained challenge to what Kierkegaard regards as modern philosophy's misleading conflation of the categories of finite and infinite, the individual and the Absolute, of speculation and faith. Thinkers as diverse as Descartes, Kant, and Hegel, each in his own fashion, ultimately advances some notion of an intrinsic and metaphysically justified unity between the apparent opposites of finite human subjectivity and Absolute Transcendence. Yet, for Kierkegaard, if one takes the standpoint of concrete subjective inwardness, of individual existence, seriously, it becomes evident that despite initial appearances (in Religiousness A), there is no a priori bond beween these mutually repellent poles, and hence no such immanent, speculative mediation is possible. The exister, despite his aspirations toward final reconciliation with the Eternal Essential Truth, discovers himself to be inescapably restrained within the bounds of temporal becoming, within which contradictions and oppositions are never finally resolvable. Indeed, the establishing of his identity as a freely existing individual demands of the subject an ever-deepening dialectical

apprehension and decisive choice of himself as a being immersed in temporal becoming, a finite self standing before, but radically distinct from, the wholly other God:

> . . . at bottom it is an immovable firmness with respect to the absolute, and with respect to absolute distinctions, that makes a man a good dialectician.[1]

Kierkegaard's existential dialectic assumes, therefore, the irreducible primacy of finite, concrete personality and individual subjective freedom, while also describing the route of discovery taken by the exister who finally recognizes that only his faithful response to the "breach with immanence" which results when "the eternal truth enters time" in the figure of Christ, can fully potentiate this subjective freedom. Thus, over against the idealism of Descartes, Kant, and Hegel, the existential dialectic takes as its incontrovertible starting-point the principle of absolute difference between finite individual spirit and "eternal essential Truth." In the context of existence (which "holds apart" the moments of finite and infinite, time and eternity), the leap of faith, which affirms the paradoxical synthesis of these elements in the figure of the God-man, thus becomes the highest act of existential self-realization. This is because, while the exister's belief in one sense has as its content the unique "reality of another," the real focus of faith is existence itself. For if the finite exister and the Divine are not intrinsically related (as the tradition suggests), then it is only through the power of the individual subject's will that the mutually exclusive poles of God and the individual can finally stand related. Faith is an act which affirms the paradoxical capacity of subjective, existential freedom to heal the discontinuities of existence, in imitation of the unifying freedom of the God-man.

Kierkegaard contends that the appearance within time of Christ, the "forgiver of sins" who synthesizes, in an act of Divine freedom, the opposites of man and God, is manifestly absurd--a rationally, even existentially incomprehensible decision on the part of the divine Other to take upon himself "the factor of becoming,"[2] and

[1] Kierkegaard, Philosophical Fragments, p. 136.

[2] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 189.

thus exemplify concretely that reconciliation to which the finite exister perpetually but unsuccessfully aspires. The object of faith, then, is not simply that God entered time (i.e., the fact of the real synthesis of the divine and human); rather the exister equally is called upon to believe that this paradoxical reality becomes actual only by virtue of an act of radical, unmediated divine freedom. It is not rationally conceivable, let alone speculatively necessary, that God should have become an individual man. The appearance of the God-man is thus a totally positive, contingent affair, and is revelatory, therefore, in two ways: firstly, in Christ is manifest the fact of the temporal synthesis of finite and infinite; secondly, there is revealed the form, the how of this factual content--a breach of immanence, a bridging of the unbridgeable gap between God and the individual, effected only by the sheer power of divine freedom itself.

The challenge of Christian faith, therefore, is correspondingly twofold: on the one hand, the believer must affirm the fact that God has entered time; but, of equal importance, he must affirm that it is through divine freedom alone that this unique incursion into the order of existence comes about. Thus, if the God-man represents for the exister the paradigmatic solution to the problems of existence, it is not simply because in Christ, existentially generated polarities are once and for all mediated, but rather because the unrepeatable event of the Incarnation mirrors, paradigmatically, the possibility that the exister himself, through the exercise of his own freedom, can effect the same paradoxical synthesis of contradictories within temporal existence. The life of Christian faith is a "tremendous exertion" and "tremendous responsibility" because it demands that the believer perpetually struggle to reaffirm, not simply the paradoxical fact of Christ's reality, but the equally absurd possibility that within time, he, a finite subject, can imitate the divine freedom.

The life of faith then is through and through a life of risk--a dialectic of self-negation and self-assertion, in which the exister becomes himself, a unique individual, by simultaneously differentiating the opposites within existence, and so in all humility acknowledging his utter dependence upon divine freedom, while at the

same time, in a paradoxical act of freedom, a leap of faith, affirming faith in his own capacity to repeat, within existence, the radical freedom of the God-man. The Christian believer is a "good dialectician" not because he is able to mediate between the opposites of time and eternity, but because, at one and the same time, he lives courageously isolated from the divine Other, while continuously asserting his paradoxical belief that precisely this isolation constitutes the foundation for a temporal, personal God-relationship.

How truly divergent is Kierkegaard's assessment of the God/man relationship from that of his idealist opponents is well exemplified in his description of the role of the act of worship in religious life:

> Precisely because there is an absolute difference between man and God, man will express his own nature most adequately when he expresses this difference absolutely. Worship is the maximum expression for the God-relationship of a human being, and hence also for his likeness with God, because the qualities are absolutely different. But the significance of worship is, that God is absolutely all for the worshipper; and the worshipper is again one who makes the absolute distinction.[3]

To worship God, the Absolute, is the most that a human individual can achieve in the sphere of religious existence. Nevertheless, for Kierkegaard, this activity in no way assists the finite subject to annul the radical difference between God and humanity--rather, quite the reverse, since it is precisely in the act of worship that finite spirit asserts absolutely its own distinction from God.

It is instructive to compare this position with that of Hegel on the same matter. Hegel contrasts the standpoint of genuine worship with the relatively undeveloped religious attitude of "fear of God," in which "individuality knows itself as in regard to the absolute object only as accidental."[4] Such self-annihilation, whereby the worshipper draws an absolute distinction between finite man and the Infinite object of his worship, Hegel insists, cannot be "the

[3] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 369. [Emphasis mine.]

[4] Hegel, Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion, I, p. 66.

true relation," for surely the finite subject must preserve himself if worship is to have any value as a relationship between the individual and the Divine. Kierkegaard, in one sense, seems to be suggesting that only absolute self-negation, however, is a fitting attitude for an exister before God. But while this purports to be a stance of total humility, it can also be construed as a form of absolute self-affirmation. While worship cannot without contradiction of its concept involve the suppression of individual spirit, Hegel would say of Kierkegaard's notion of worship that it is predicated, on the one hand, upon just such an abject "fear of God," which insists upon expressing itself only as the absolute difference between the divine and human. But furthermore, if in the act of worship the finite subject " . . . is again one who makes the absolute distinction,"[5] then surely such an action embodies neither a seemly humility nor even radical self-abnegation, but rather an attempt arrogantly to assert the intrinsic power and independent validity of finite spirit, even in relation to the Divine. Thus, depending upon which element in the act one emphasizes, Kierkegaard's notion of worship either totally dissipates the reality of finite subjectivity, or else elevates finitude to a position of divine authority--in neither instance accomplishing that authentic God-relationship which is its intention.

If the majesty of the Absolute is to receive its due, worship must aim at a reconciliation between the finite and infinite, a relationship wherein the difference is clearly recognized, but not in such a way as either to absolutize finite inwardness and freedom or to limit and finitize the reality of the Divine. Indeed, in worship, the finite subject must in some way acknowledge his subordinate position, but he must beware of the danger, exemplified in Kierkegaard's religious exister, that self-negation may mask a covert "worship" of the isolation and freedom of finite subjectivity itself. For Hegel, the individual who recognizes his own nothingness before God in that act also realizes that his own essential being must therefore rest in God, and cannot possibly constitute itself

[5] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 369.

(even as "nothing") over against the Divine Other, in an ultimately dualistic manner:

> But this standpoint of separation is not the true relation. On the contrary, it is what knows itself to be a nullity, and, therefore, something to be done away with and absorbed; and its attitude is not merely a negative one, but is in itself, or implicitly, positive. The subject recognises the absolute substance, in which it has to annul or lose itself, as being at the same time its essence, its substance, in which, therefore, self-consciousness is inherently contained. It is this unity, reconciliation, restoration of the subject and of its self-consciousness, the positive feeling of possessing a share in, of partaking in this Absolute, and making unity with it actually one's own--this abolition of the dualism, which constitutes the sphere of worship. Worship comprises this entire inward and outward action, which has this restoration to unity as its object.[6]

Kierkegaard would of course reject this appreciation of the role of worship as a misguided attempt by a finite existing individual to share directly in the transcendent Being of God--as "an ungodly and atheistic self-deification."[7] It is in their very contradictoriness that the truth of both finite existence and Infinite Being are alone revealed: any attempt to reconcile the radical dualism to which finite spirit is heir only obscures the concreteness of individual existence, while also undermining the purity of Absolute Reality. The most for which the subjective exister and worshipper can hope therefore is the momentary satisfaction of the leap of faith.

The question which must be asked of Kierkegaard, however, is whether this apparently modest proposal actually fulfills its intention of enabling the existing individual to preserve and express, entirely within the bounds of temporal becoming, the truth of finite subjective spirit. The suspicion was already raised early in this study,[8] that the significance of such a category as that of a finite, ethically-inward subject, who decisively commits himself to the subjective problems of existing, to the exclusion of

[6] Hegel, Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion, I, pp. 66-67.

[7] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 112.

[8] See Chapter III, section 4.

addressing merely contemplative matters of ontology, metaphysics, and theology, is nevertheless essentially dependent upon precisely these non-existential concepts, which from the point of view of finite becoming and subjective truth are inaccessible and indeed illusory. The results of our subsequent close examination of the path of Kierkegaard's existential dialectic now make it possible to shed further light upon that earlier concern.

It is the concept of an "absolute difference" between God and the individual which generates the tension, the dynamic framework within which the "ceaseless striving" of the finite subject for selfhood takes place.[9] Without the clear understanding of God as the "absolutely other" who "is" but does not exist,[10] for whom "existence is a system,"[11] and in whom "thought and being are united,"[12] the striving of the exister, who is "existentially in process of becoming" would be simply an aimless activity, lacking direction or purpose. The finite self becomes fully a self precisely through the ethico-religious struggle to relate himself, in truth (i.e., qua freely existing individual), to the eternal essential truth of the divine Other. Thus, the basic elements in the existential dialectic are two radically separate, in fact contradictory, conceptions of Being, and two correspondingly divergent notions of truth. On the one hand, God, "the infinite itself," in whom being and thought unite; on the other, the finite subject who, if he "concentrates all his attention on the circumstance that he is an existing individual," welcomes Lessing's comments about a persistent striving "as a beautiful saying."[13] The unity of thought and being which is the Divine substance, the "eternal essential truth," is in principle inaccessible to the finite exister, whose being is a becoming--a becoming, however, which gains authenticity only in terms of its paradoxical efforts to relate, within temporal existence,

[9] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 85.

[10] Ibid., p. 107.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid., p. 296.

[13] Ibid., p. 109.

to the transcendent being and eternal truth of the absolutely Other.

The paradoxical character which Kierkegaard ascribes to finite existence is grounded, then, in a radically dualistic ontology. The experience of anguish and self-alienation which determines the character of individual existence, and which motivates the exister to seek authentic selfhood in a God-relationship, could not arise unless the subject apprehended himself as dweller in two worlds, one finite and temporal, the other infinite and eternal. Further, the paradoxical nature of the repeated acts of freedom whereby this experience of alienation is overcome is a function of the metaphysical assumption, on the part of the exister, that these two orders are radically and irreducibly contradictory. In other words, the possibility of existential, subjective truth, culminating in the paradoxical self-certainty of faith, is intrinsically bound up with the acceptance of the ontological thesis that there is an eternal essential truth, valid in itself, but forever inaccessible to the finite, temporal subject. The finite exister can never confront absolute Being directly--he is, after all, only a "poor existing subject"; yet the significance of existential becoming grows out of the tacit assumption of an absolutely transcendent reality. Furthermore, within Christian experience, the relationship of the finite exister is with an absolute reality not simply paradoxical in relation to existence, but "paradoxical in itself."

Thus even--indeed especially--at the level of Christian faith there persists a profound dualism between the individual believer and God. If the finite and infinite were not presumed to be mutually exclusive categories, then there would be no existential angst, no infinite yearning after the impossible, and the life of faith could not be essentially characterized as a life of perpetual risk, of self-concern about whether one really has a "right relationship" to the eternal essential truth.

But the central difficulty with Kierkegaard's notion of finite subjectivity is not a direct consequence of his dualistic presuppositions. The Cartesian turn to subjectivity, after all, also posits a duality of substances, of mind and matter, which is overcome in the infinite substance of God. Kierkegaard views his own standpoint as a revolutionary alternative to Descartes and his successors not

because it abolishes dualism, but because existentialism dispenses with the metaphysical assumptions about the nature of finite spirit (e.g., that man is essentially a thinker, a knower), which ultimately evoke the comic absurdities of absolute idealism. Again, Kierkegaard does not criticize Kant so much for the implicit dualism of his metaphysics, as for his claim that metaphysical deduction can illuminate the activity of the ethically free subject, and determine the possibilities and limits of religious faith. The existential priority of freely existing subjective spirit is not treated with sufficient seriousness by any thinker within the western tradition--this is Kierkegaard's central contention. Thus, he wishes to undercut traditional metaphysical distinctions, in order to begin immediately with the experience of the concretely existing, particular "I"--the individual who always keeps in mind that he is finite subjectivity, and as such has no speculative access to the eternal truths of metaphysics.

But despite this determination to avoid the seductions of metaphysical speculation, it now seems that the finite exister draws his value, indeed his very motive for existing, from precisely those metaphysical truths and ideals to which, as a finite exister, he can have no authentic access. In fact, it is essential to the very structure of finite becoming that the exister define himself in terms of his unfulfilled, negative relationship to the Absolute. The exister "needs" not only God, but the metaphysical concept of God--an understanding of God precisely as a transcendent reality, absolutely other than finite existence--if he is to accentuate and fully experience his own existential reality as a being capable of aspiring to an "absolute relationship to the Absolute."

But if the finite subject truly is immersed in existence, unable therefore to transcend his condition of temporal becoming in order to gaze directly upon the eternal essential truth, then the very possibility of such a dialectical interrelationship as Kierkegaard describes surely must be called into question. For how can the finite subject, who insofar as he exists authentically must concern himself solely with his subjective relationship to the divine Other--ignoring such speculative matters as the nature of God--ever generate the conceptual appreciation of the radical

distinction between finite becoming and divine Being and Truth, which is the essential ground for all his existential striving? By definition, the authentic exister is a "subjective thinker" only, and the object of his understanding is himself, within existence. He directs his thought therefore not toward speculation regarding the nature of the eternal essential truth, but rather is intensely concerned about how he, a poor finite exister, may bring himself into an appropriate relationship with the Absolute.

But if this is the sole genuine function for the existential thinker, then who can legitimately pursue and validate the truth, and the existential significance, of such crucial ontological claims as that "existence is a system for God," or that God, as "the infinite itself," really is the absolute antithesis of finite individuality? Or, in the context of Christian faith, that the eternal essential truth is not only paradoxical through its relationship to finite subjectivity, but is paradoxical in itself? Surely no finite exister can authentically adopt the "standpoint of eternity" from which alone it would be possible to apprehend and verify the intrinsic truth, and thus the importance for existential striving, of these propositions?

Precisely because he is "existentially in process of becoming," the truth for the finite subject is always a matter for decisive appropriation, not of contemplation. Nevertheless, existential thought "must always correspond to the structure of existence." But if the exister indeed is constantly absorbed in becoming, in reaching out to appropriate those possibilities which enable him to become fully subjective, then what is the nature of the standpoint, and what the status of the thinker, who develops and articulates those ontological views regarding the "structure of existence," its difference from "the infinite itself," etc., which constitute an essential element in the dialectic of becoming? How does the "poor existing subject," caught up in the ceaseless struggle to forge an adequate relationship to God, achieve a sufficiently contemplative perspective from which to apprehend what that "structure of existence" is, to which he must conform all his subjective thinking?

But if, qua existing subject, the finite individual cannot engage in disinterested contemplation either of the structure of existence or of the essential nature of the divine reality, how then is it possible for him ever to experience his existence with such certainty as radically finite, hence isolated from the infinitude of God? Must not anyone who seeks a relationship, even in the form of a disrelation, between himself as finite and the Infinite as such, be capable of apprehending and validating the difference between the two? And if so, must he not be able at least meaningfully to "think" the Infinite, and so in some sense transcend the flux of existential striving and passionate appropriation? Yet, this is precisely what Kierkegaard insists no finite exister can ever do.

Put another way: when Kierkegaard contends that there is a radical polarity between the flux of existential thinking and the disinterested standpoint of speculative thought, and when he further maintains that the former is the legitimate sphere for finite existers (i.e., all of humanity), then the question must be raised as to what is the standpoint of the individual who makes this particular claim; and, further, as to the epistemological status of the claim itself. If any thinking which is "wholly indifferent to subjectivity"[14] and seeks access only to truth as it is in itself, is closed to authentically existing beings, then of what type is the thinking which articulates the true relationship between such metaphysical speculations and subjective reflections? Does such a thinker occupy a uniquely privileged perspective from which to clarify and evaluate the essential truth (the "objective" truth?) of the dualistic structure of existence, and the radical distinction between time and eternity?

According to Kierkegaard, the existing subject simply finds himself confronted by these stark oppositions, and with the ethical responsibility for effecting their paradoxical existential synthesis. There is, for the exister, therefore, no problem of metaphysically understanding either himself or Eternal Reality, but rather the

[14] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 70.

passionately subjective problem of how to appropriate the eternal truth, and hence absolutely choose himself as finite subjectivity. Speculative inquiry into the origins and intrinsic meaning of such existentially significant oppositions as that between existential becoming and eternal being is something prohibited to the existential thinker, since, as a radically finite subject, he is one of the polar elements within that opposition. There is a profound distinction drawn in Kierkegaard's existentialism between the pursuit of subjective self-understanding (i.e., of what is truth for me) and the eternal essential truth in itself, which functions as a kind of "regulative ideal" for the exister. But surely, this crucial distinction between two modes of reflection, one authentic, the other spurious, is itself a distinction made by thought, a thought which is neither existentially committed, nor, if we are to accept Kierkegaard's warnings about the illusions of metaphysical speculation, objective and disinterested. Yet, within the "ontic" life of finite existing spirit, there seems to be no place for such a third category of "ontological" understanding.[15]

This problem of the standpoints legitimately open to a genuinely finite exister arises in another form when one considers the ambiguous status of the writer of Concluding Unscientific Postscript. Kierkegaard assumes no direct responsibility for the content

[15] This Heideggerian distinction between an "ontic" pre-reflective finite existence and the "ontological" reflection upon the essential structures of existence is useful in illuminating Kierkegaard's position here. I have argued in this study that, even though Kierkegaard's existentialism presupposes the validity of a definite ontology, the suppression of any explicit ontological perspective or mode of understanding is also essential to Kierkegaard's existential standpoint, since any speculative mediation of the radical discontinuities and absolute distinctions which motivate existential becoming would tend to undermine the freedom and passionate inwardness of the individual who is Kierkegaard's sole absolute presupposition. Nevertheless, subsequent existence philosophers--especially Heidegger--felt compelled to draw this explicit distinction--and so to develop an explicit ontology of existence--in order to defend their approach from those very charges of "arbitrariness" which Kierkegaard (despite his adoption of an ironic, uncommitted standpoint) already struggled to avoid.

of this work (nor for numerous other of his aesthetic and ethical writings), but attributes it instead to the pseudonymous pen of one Johannes Climacus, who describes himself as a humorist and a non-Christian who is interested in the question of how he can become a Christian. Thus, Climacus possesses inwardness, but emphasizes that it is not sufficient to enable him to make a leap of faith. Nevertheless, from his somewhat removed vantage point he can view and describe in vivid detail the dialectic whereby the individual who is concerned with self-realization discovers the need for a God-relationship, and ultimately the paradoxical necessity for making the leap. He outlines with ironic detachment the comic antics of objective and speculative thinkers, as they try to explain existence, freedom, and the movements of faith; while making no direct personal commitment to the eternal essential truth, his subjective, indirect communications dramatically set before other existers the possibility of a God-relationship, which they in their freedom may choose to realize or not. His work, Climacus insists, offers no final results, no truth-claims or objective propositions to be contemplated or learned.[16]

The Postscript, then, is not intended either as a dispassionate theoretical study of the finite subject and his subjective truth, nor is it a philosophical justification of the primacy of inwardness and freedom, to be assessed on grounds of logic. Rather, the form of the work--its poetic language of indirect communication, the elusive pseudonymous authorship, the "uncommitted" phenomenological descriptions of existential possibilities--all reflect Kierkegaard's fundamental assumption of the ineffable and irreducible priority of free, inwardly existing individuality, and his consequent determination to leave every such subject free to make his own decision with respect to Climacus'--and Christianity's--"existence-

[16] "So then the book is superfluous; let no one therefore take pains to appeal to it as an authority; for he who thus appeals to it has eo ipso misunderstood it." Kierkegaard, CUP, appendix, p. 546.

communications."[17]

The principle of free subjectivity underlies this work, therefore, as its central presupposition--not because, carelessly, Kierkegaard omitted to justify its use, but because by its very nature, subjective individual inwardness defies conceptualization, so that to speak objectively about it would be absurd. Climacus satirizes such attempts in the figures of those "town criers of inwardness"[18] who fall into self-contradiction by proclaiming directly that subjectivity is truth, and "truth exists only in the process of becoming."[19] Such proclamations ironically fail to free the subject to become himself, and to appropriate the truth for himself, because they actually communicate the reverse of what they intend--they communicate a result. In happy contrast to these comic purveyors of inwardness stands the figure of the "gadfly," Socrates, whose "maieutic artistry"[20] at most encouraged, assisted, and indeed provoked the subject to find truth for and within himself.

Kierkegaard's whole approach, then, models itself upon Socratic "midwifery"--it is designed to evoke and express existential, not metaphysical certainties. He was thus one of the many post-Hegelian thinkers who proclaimed the "end of philosophy" in its traditional systematic and speculative formulations. Kierkegaard in fact insists that the "standpoint of eternity" assumed by traditional metaphysical thinkers is a standpoint impossible for an existing thinker to maintain--and we are each of us, like Climacus, first and last "a poor, individual existing man." The intention of Kierkegaard, through Climacus, then, is not directly to present a

[17] See Kierkegaard, CUP, "A First and Last Declaration" (where Kierkegaard acknowledges his authorship of CUP and several other works, including Either/Or and Philosophical Fragments), "My pseudonymity . . . has not had a casual ground in my person . . . but it has an essential ground in the character of the production . . . ."

[18] Ibid., p. 71.

[19] Ibid., p. 72.

[20] Ibid., p. 74.

philosophy or even a theology of finite subjectivity, but, like Socrates, to shock and stimulate his individual readers into personal decisiveness--to awaken them to the priority of individual freedom, to remind them of their forgotten inwardness. The indirect, elusive, and multi-faceted style of the Postscript is the only possible vehicle for this ineffable content.[21]

The central, if indirect, message of the Postscript is therefore that one cannot theorize, either about individual ethical inwardness, or about its ontological relation to the Christian existence-communication. But precisely here the problem of the nature and function of the existential author's standpoint itself becomes acute. Climacus, the existing finite thinker, dispenses ironic warnings to other such existers to avoid the self-deceit practised by the "town-criers of inwardness"; yet, even to be in the position of using such indirect methods of communication, the writer must himself make certain ontological assumptions. Primary among these is the assumption, which by definition can never be speculatively justified, of the primary, irreducible reality of the particular individual subject. This individual constitutes the undisputed source and focus of all ethico-religious activity, and, in and through its very elusiveness, the absolute presupposition of all human thought and experience. It is this "absolute subject" alone who assesses the meaning and value of the various stages of the existential dialectic, who authorizes all authentically existential content, and who validates all authentic methodologies for communicating it. Thus, it is the individual subjective thinker

[21] As one commentator says of him, the use of the pseudonyms, of indirect techniques of communication--of "equivocity"--testifies to Kierkegaard's recognition of the "poverty of univocity" to express the truth of subjective freedom and self-apprehension. Kierkegaard, he suggests, "opposed the course of modern philosophy to the end that he might reinstate philosophy in its historic and poetic destiny." Louis Mackey, Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), p. 269. This theme of a return to the roots of philosophizing in a pre-ontological, pre-metaphysical, "poetic" life-world is reiterated in numerous later existence thinkers, e.g., Nietzsche, Heidegger, and even the "pure" phenomenologist Husserl, who seeks radical new methods and beginnings for philosophers, through a reduction to the "always pre-given" life-world of concrete individual experience, as the "hidden" source of intentional activities.

himself to whom all finite becoming is relative. Climacus' accusation that traditional philosophizing dogmatically assumes the possibility of an absolute knowledge of the Absolute, itself rests upon a dogmatic foundation: for it assumes that all significant thinking and experience is, absolutely, a matter of "points of view," and that individual freedom therefore consists in expressing and structuring the possibilities inherent in these perspectives in relation to oneself, as the decisive and irreducible locus within existence for all truth:

> Only the truth which edifies is truth for you.[22]

The whole notion of "indirect communication" presupposes that the existing individual who uses the approach is himself capable of drawing a (direct?) distinction between direct and indirect modes of communication, on the basis of which evaluation he can then proceed to communicate authentically (i.e., indirectly), through the use of pseudonyms, poetic language, etc. The ironic rejection of the "town crier of inwardness" insinuates that such existential verities as that "subjective inwardness is truth," that "Christianity and the leap of faith constitute the authentic potentiation of subjective inwardness," and so on, cannot be theoretically apprehended without destroying their essential existential significance. Yet does not this claim--i.e., <u>that</u> genuine existential communication <u>can only be indirect</u>, a challenge to each exister to act and think for himself--itself have the implicit form of an <u>absolute</u> metaphysical pronouncement upon the conditions and possibilities of individual existence? But would not such a pronouncement have to rest upon a more complete and final apprehension of the nature and limits of finite existence than can possibly be open to the "poor existing individual," for whom experience is radically temporal, and for whom truth therefore is a matter of perpetual becoming, perspectival and incomplete?

The style of the <u>Postscript</u> is in fact an amalgam of detached, "phenomenological" descriptions of the progress of the existential dialectic, and ironically disparaging commentary upon the comic aspirations to truth of various speculative and objective thinkers.

[22] Kierkegaard, <u>Either/Or</u>, II, p. 356.

Kierkegaard's "Climacus" persona is essentially that of a satiric observer and humorist--in this respect, it can be said that this standpoint most closely parallels Kierkegaard's own:

> Humour and irony provide semi-detached viewpoints which mediate imaginatively between the stages of existence, oases of momentary disengagement from which the stages may be observed and compared. So the most comprehensive of Kierkegaardian pseudonyms tend to be humourists, of whom the prince is Johannes Climacus. Kierkegaard's commitment to religion, plus the locus of humour almost within the forecourts of the temple, make Climacus the pseudonym closest to Kierkegaard himself.[23]

This is the standpoint of one who knows that all existential perspectives are finite--and that all perspectives are existential. Freed from participation in the existential dialectic, this ironic observer recognizes and approves the relativity to the existing subject of all points of view, and then strives to communicate indirectly the existential value and possibilities implicit in each:

> I have no opinion and wish to have none. . . . 'Only the positive is an encroachment upon another man's personal freedom' . . . .[24]

But if indeed all authentic existence is based on personal commitment and appropriation of truth, then what is the nature of Climacus' commitment? It would seem that it must be a kind of "commitment to non-commitment." As Louis Mackey has it, Climacus occupies a standpoint of negative freedom from existential involvement, which allows him to scrutinize and comment upon the contradictions and tensions of existential becoming without himself being "subjectively prejudiced" in favor of any of them:

[23] Mackey, Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet, p. 281.

[24] Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 547. This "detachment" from the stages of existential becoming which characterizes Climacus' standpoint is regarded by Mackey as an aesthetic advantage, which enables him to describe "without subjective prejudice" the "tenor of subjectivity." (Ibid., p. 283). But if Climacus' standpoint is merely "aesthetic," then according to his own account he indeed does occupy a stage within existence, and his pronouncements cannot be viewed as non-distortive; while, if this is not an aesthetic detachment, then it is difficult to see how such a vantage point can be understood existentially at all.

> Humour is the Kierkegaardian replacement for philosophic objectivity. It treats without distortion existential problems from which speculation can only abstract and by abstracting confound.[25]

But is there not a profound paradox implied in the notion of a "non-distortive" existential viewpoint, and a deep contradiction in the idea that the genuine exister requires any sort of "replacement for philosophic objectivity"? If the humorist knows the relativity to the individual of all existential standpoints--including, one supposes, his own--then he must be capable of adopting a non-existential vantage point from which to survey the ontological structures of finite existence, and from which, therefore, the universal relativity and "interested commitment" of all existential perspectives can be meaningfully attested. Yet, how, within the parameters of finite becoming, is such a radical transcendence of the immediate self-relationality of all authentic knowing to be accounted for?

Kierkegaard's chief aim in tracing the complex development of the existential dialectic has been to bring into sharp relief the standpoint of finite subjective existence in its relationship to Christian faith. We have now seen that the finite subject's passionate quest for the fullness of subjectivity takes place within the context of certain metaphysical presuppositions--notably, the assumption that the truth of finite individuality can only be adequately apprehended over against the Absolutely Other, God. Yet we have seen that such a radical ontological distinction between finite and infinite as the possibility of an existential standpoint, in Kierkegaard's sense, presupposes, generates a highly paradoxical notion of subjectivity, and of its "potentiation" in the leap to the Christian faith.

Further, "thinking," for Kierkegaard, is authentically existential only when it has the individual's relation to existential problems as its matter, so that any metaphysical consideration of the intrinsic nature of the Eternal, of truth, or even of existence as such, is a priori ruled out for the existing individual. Yet,

[25] Mackey, Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet, p. 283.

we have seen that in order to articulate or even indirectly recommend the existential standpoint to his reader, Kierkegaard, or his pseudonym, must himself be able to adopt a standpoint from which he can with detachment describe, if not draw, the distinction between authentic and inauthentic human perspectives. This standpoint cannot be adequately characterized as that of "subjective reflection"--yet it plays a pivotal role both in Kierkegaard's writing itself, and indeed in the thought of any individual exister, whether or not he chooses to communicate the fruits of his self-experience.

The progress of the existential dialectic depends throughout upon "firmness with respect to absolute distinctions"[26]--any idealistic attempt at mediating the fundamental logical/ontological disparity between finite and infinite being does violence to both dimensions, on the one hand undermining the concrete freedom and individuality of finite spirit, and on the other defiling the absolute freedom and infinite reality of the Divine. But while the intention behind Kierkegaard's humble affirmation of the absolute difference between the finite exister and the Infinite is to carve out at last a genuine role for finite subjective spirit, and to provide a "corrective" for the abstractions of speculative philosophy, there remains a danger that such an approach may fall victim to precisely that "empty absolutism" of which it accuses its idealist opponents.

Opposing what he regards as Hegelian idealism's arrogant claim to justify human access to absolute knowledge and being, Kierkegaard takes a Kantian-style viewpoint by insisting that no finite human understanding can aspire to such insight into Infinite Reality, as it is in itself. He opposes Kant, also, however, by rejecting the possibility even of meaningful metaphysical thinking about the Absolute, maintaining that the rationally paradoxical leap of faith constitutes the highest humanly defensible ambition. No "poor existing individual" can meaningfully concern himself with direct questions about that which absolutely transcends human experience, but must content himself with affirming the philosophically and existentially paradoxical possibility of forming a temporal relationship with the Divine, through the power of faith:

[26] Kierkegaard, Philosophical Fragments, pp. 136-137.

> Faith, therefore, is the anticipation of the eternal which holds . . . together, the discontinuities of existence. If an existing person does not have faith, then God neither *is* nor *is* God *present*, although understood eternally God nevertheless eternally is . . . .[27]

But since Kierkegaardian existentialism everywhere grounds itself in the assumption that no finite subject can without self-contradiction adopt this latter viewpoint of eternity, the conclusion looms that, for an exister, since God only *is* within faith, then his chief concern must be, not with the substantial content of faith, but with the existential question of whether he himself has achieved the attitude of faith which will bring God into *being for him*.

Throughout the *Postscript* Kierkegaard is at pains to distinguish the sincere fanatic's absolute subjectivity, which is erroneously preoccupied with the finite and relative only, from the genuine subjective inwardness of the believer, whose absolute inwardness is essentially bound up with the absolutely transcendent, yet paradoxically *existing* reality of the God-man, Christ. It remains the case, however, that this unique reality becomes existentially significant, the sole possible content for faith, only through the decisive, radically free choice of the individual subject.[28] Thus even--indeed, especially--at the level of religious self-consciousness, it is the appropriative freedom of the individual himself which remains the unconditioned and immediate source of existential value and truth. To put the matter in the idiom of Kierkegaard's idealist adversaries--the finite subjective will, despite its insistence upon its own inessentiality in relationship to the Infinite as such, continues to mediate all possible objectivity, while itself remaining

[27] SKJP, II, p. 97, #1347.

[28] "Freedom is the true wonderful lamp; when a man rubs it with ethical passion, God comes into being for him." Kierkegaard, CUP, p. 124. Although Kierkegaard goes on to insist that through freedom, the exister becomes the servant of God, this dependence upon the Divine Absolute is itself *dependent* upon the exister's will.

fixed and unmediated, or absolute.[29] Theologically speaking, this means that the finite believer's faith in the possibility of sustaining a God-relationship, replaces God himself, as the focus of religious concern.

Thus, even when the intended object of faith is the Divine Reality itself, so that finite subjectivity supposedly achieves concrete selfhood in an "absolute relationship to the Absolute," the standpoint of the exister remains, like that of the "sincere fanatic," abstractly subjective only.[30] Even as he assents to his ultimate dependence upon the objective reality of the God-man, the faithful exister retains his individual authority as the final arbiter of what may count as subjective truth, so that even the Christian existence-communication becomes true, through the action of the finite subject's will, expressed in the leap of faith. But if this is the case, then redemption--the realization of the fullness of individuality, the overcoming of that alienation which marks finite subjective existence--becomes a merely contingent affair, dependent upon the will of each isolated and abstractly absolute subject for its enactment. Even for those who risk themselves in the leap of faith, no concrete reconciliation with "the eternal essential Truth" occurs, because in the free decisiveness of the leap, that infinite substantial Content, so crucial to ensuring the concreteness of finite individual becoming, is itself rendered finite.

Faith, at best, "anticipates the Eternal," and commits the believer to a ceaseless reenactment of the leap, to a restless

[29] See Hegel, Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion, I, p. 187. "What we have here is that the finite Ego, inasmuch as it is the positing of an infinite beyond itself, has posited the infinite itself as a finite, and is therein identical with itself as that which is in like manner finite, and now as being identical with the infinite becomes infinite itself."

[30] "But this very subjectivity, this culmination of finiteness, still maintains itself; in it all content evaporates and is rendered vain. . . . This culmination has the appearance of being a renunciation of the finite, but it is just in it that finiteness as such still maintains itself. . . . What is wanting here is objectivity. . . . I alone am the Positive, and no content has value on its own account, it has no longer affirmation in itself, but only in so far as I lay it down." Ibid., pp. 187-188.

yearning for an Absolute, a Beyond, which forever eludes him. The authentic believer, then, despite his standpoint of faith, remains in a condition of estrangement, at home neither in the universality of the ethical community of other men, nor with the Absolute reality of the Divine. But if temporal becoming, with its culmination in the life of faith, never can be more than a "persistent striving" for unity with the Absolute, a unity which the exister regards as essential for his individual self-realization, then it seems that finite becoming is drained of its concrete, intrinsic value--precisely the result which commitment to an existential dialectic, grounded in the freedom of the individual, finite subject, is intended to counteract.

This, then, is a central difficulty in Kierkegaard's approach to the problem of finite subjectivity. The very effort fully to potentiate the concreteness of individual existence--to resist that devaluation of the human implied in the attitudes of objectifying science and of abstract, speculative logic--seems ultimately to defeat its own deepest purpose. Instead of securing the dignity and self-certainty of finite subjectivity, this radical emphasis upon the primacy of the standpoint of individual inwardness and freedom, even in matters of "ultimate concern," seems rather to confirm the subject's condition of alienation. For on the one hand, this starting-point serves to entrench the subject in a position of abstract freedom only, which lacks any essential reference to a content beyond itself; while on the other it condemns the authentic exister to a life of unmitigated anguish and self-doubt, as he ceaselessly struggles to reenact and reevaluate his existential perspective.

The question must be asked, therefore, whether such unremitting faith in the standpoint of finite subjectivity does not perhaps actually undermine the possibility of a genuine and concrete humanism, rather than facilitating it for the first time, as Kierkegaard intends. Perhaps the finite subject's steadfast refusal--indeed, his inability--to assume a standpoint from which to reflect upon the intrinsic significance and validity of subjective inwardness, fosters no true estimation of the ontological structure and concrete requirements and determinations of human finitude. Kierkegaard's dialectical maneuvers and protestations about the

transcendence of the object of existential faith notwithstanding, the upshot of his "existential turn" is to throw the existing subject radically back upon himself, upon his own finite, temporal resources, which alone form the authentic starting-point, content, and final goal for existential striving. Thus, even the religious stage of existence, in which presumably the authentic, non-speculating individual finally apprehends what it is to be a finite subject, must always be approached and understood through the lens of a primary, irreducibly valid ethical inwardness, the full potentiation of which is what motivates even the religious believer, when he makes the leap of faith.

The concrete unity of the finite and infinite, which is the ideal guiding the development of the several stages of existence, is therefore a unity posited and ceaselessly actualized through the ineffable freedom of the individual subjective will. The freely existing subject thus clings to his life of finite becoming as to a badge of courage and humility. In so doing, however, while he "infinitizes" the standpoint of finite selfhood, he does so at the expense of all concrete content, and thus renders his existential freedom infinitely abstract, empty, arbitrarily and "merely" subjective once again. Such an individual, absorbed in infinitely authenticating his own finite selfhood, stands in the gravest danger of relinquishing the very humanity which it is his deepest need to preserve.

Epilogue

Existence Philosophy and the Problem of Metaphysics

The general aim of this study has been to draw attention to the seminal importance for the development of existential philosophy of the notion of finite subjectivity. More specifically, it has sought to clarify the way this theme grows from deep foundations in traditional philosophy--notably in the thought of Descartes and Kant--to become one of the central rallying points for the radical critique of that tradition's principles and ideals initiated by many post-Hegelian thinkers.

Existentialism is a notoriously diffuse philosophy. Indeed, the problem frequently arises, for both its adherents and its critics--though for antithetical reasons--as to whether it ought to be called philosophy at all. Anyone trying to characterize existentialism encounters interminable and often seemingly irresolvable disputes as to which particular thinker's contributions can validly be deemed "existential," such that even the scope of the loose classification "existential movement" seems impossible to determine.

These difficulties notwithstanding, the existential perspective is now an influential facet of contemporary life, both philosophically and in the wider cultural sense. Several of the possibilities inherent in Kierkegaard's initial existential turn have been explored and articulated; disparate and indeed contradictory as these formulations often appear, I would suggest that it is possible to find in the proliferation of divergent existential points of view a sustained, coherent, and unified, though still developing, debate.

This study has to some extent exposed the conditions of the possibility within traditional philosophy of Kierkegaard's existential turn. But Kierkegaard's starting-point <u>presents itself</u> as a radical break with previous modes of philosophizing: dramatically rejecting

the validity and the relevance to human existence of metaphysical truth-claims, Kierkegaard's intial leap is to the assumption that the finitely existing subject is the self-verifying foundation and terminus for all thought and practice--and to its corollary, that therefore it is the standpoint of finite subjectivity alone which determines the value and significance for man both of the "universal" conclusions of metaphysical reasoning and of the transcendent reality of God. I would contend that it is the sustained attempt to maintain and adequately to articulate this radical assumption which, in varying forms, continues to animate the diverse pathways of contemporary existentialism.

At this stage in the development of the existential movement, the need is clear for some form of "meta-meditation" which would address the philosophical consequences of the profound challenge to traditional ideals manifested in the existentialists' adoption and defence of this standpoint of radical finitude. My hope is that the conclusions reached in the present study will help to meet that need, by providing a useful starting-point--both as an organizational focus and as a fruitful interpretive point of reference--for tracing, understanding, and assessing the complex growth of these post-Kierkegaardian philosophies of finitude.

Adopting for the present the spirit of a Kierkegaardian thought-experiment, let me suggest one direction which an examination of contemporary existence philosophy, undertaken in the light of the foregoing assessment of Kierkegaard's initial insight, might take. From the iconoclastic aphorisms of Nietzsche to the fundamental ontological reflections of Heidegger, the otherwise diverse interpreters of finite subjectivity are united by a common concern to articulate and build upon Kierkegaard's insights. But the finite subject who emerges within the existential dialectic is an ambiguous figure. In one sense, Kierkegaard's turn to ethical inwardness as the only "true" (i.e., existentially valid) locus for certainty, for that "secure knowledge" which "will not at the last moment transform itself into a hypothesis," drives a deep wedge between those who seek the absolute truth through metaphysical speculation and those who find in such abstract philosophizing yet a further aggravation of the individual's condition of spiritlessness and alienation. At the same time, however, it links him to the

metaphysical tradition with its ideal of absolute knowledge as the unity of certainty and truth. Later defenders of the standpoint of finite subjectivity thus face a dual challenge: in a negative sense, to expose the dangers, for the maintenance of finite freedom, of continued dependence upon traditional metaphysical and theological categories and ideals; and positively, to engage in genuinely existential discourse upon the nature of finite subjective existence.

Although Kierkegaard's defence of the primacy of finite subjectivity is indirect, and indeed stresses the necessity of such indirect methods of communication when the existing subject is the focus of discourse, nevertheless, the aim of the individual throughout the existential dialectic is to come to an explicit awareness of that which he already implicitly is. It is the pursuit of self-certainty, the ceaseless struggle consciously to express the "structure of existence," by recognizing and articulating the foundational role of subjective inwardness and freedom in all matters of essential knowledge, that constitutes the significant content of an authentic existence. Thus, despite the fact that in popular consciousness existentialism is viewed as a philosophy which stresses ethical action over metaphysical contemplation, it can be argued that the central concern of post-Kierkegaardian existentialism is to ground itself in an "authentic" understanding of the implications of asserting this primacy of the sheer <u>activity</u> of existing over detached contemplation and metaphysical investigation of existence. Kierkegaard makes no specific recommendations on what an authentic exister ought to do, beyond the insistence that he must act in the fullest possible consciousness of his condition as a finite subject. To act authentically is simply to act as oneself--to act in a genuinely human way. But in order to accomplish this, an understanding of what it means to be genuinely human is an obvious prerequisite. Thus, although the standpoint of finite existence itself is taken as an absolutely given starting-point by existence philosophers, such that no metaphysical justification or dialectical explanation of its genesis is or can be sought, yet each thinker undertakes in his own way to render explicit the structures of existence, even as it is equally avowed that such undertakings must be seen as perspectival, or as descriptions or interpretations of that standpoint which remains

their elusive presupposition, source, and context. Thus, there is a persistent movement toward the development of an "ontology of human finitude," at the same time as it is asserted that all such efforts must ultimately founder upon the freedom and finitude of concrete existence.

Even Kierkegaard's virtual contemporary, Friedrich Nietzsche--who shared his distaste for metaphysical speculation and its results, and affirmed the priority of the individual over the abstractions of reflection--was already seeking to become more fully conscious of the significance of assuming this radical new standpoint. Although, with Kierkegaard, he is today appealed to as an early champion of individuality and existential freedom, it would be a mistake to view Nietzsche's caustic attacks upon traditional ideals and values as simply a parallel atheistic alternative to Kierkegaardian inwardness. For although Nietzsche never encountered or responded directly to Kierkegaard's writings, it can be argued that implicit in his thought is a radical critique of Kierkegaardian-style ethico-religious inwardness, undertaken as part of an attempt to become more deeply aware of the implications and responsibilities of finite existence.

When Nietzsche asserts the primacy of the concretely existing and acting individual over systematic thinking, his great concern is to expose all forms of "otherworldliness," all standpoints and principles which have as their goal the grounding of human reality in a transcendent, "meta-physical" order. Such standpoints, although they purport to be seeking truth, do so only at the expense of the concrete actuality of life: they are nihilistic, because they deny the value of this finite, changing temporal sphere of becoming, draining it of all intrinsic significance. Now it might appear that the Kierkegaardian turn to ethical inwardness is a rebellion against such nihilistic flights from immediacy--but from a Nietzschean point of view, it would have to be said that the inwardly-existing subject's preoccupation with such ideals as "ethical certainty" and "eternal happiness," far from liberating him from abstract metaphysical allegiances, actually perpetuates the very metaphysical absolutism they are intended to combat.

For although the inwardly existing subject implicitly affirms individual existence as the center of human truth and value, he

fails to realize the full significance of this standpoint. Ceaselessly absorbed in willing himself, qua inwardly existing freedom, as the sole essential truth, this individual does not recognize that even his will-to-truth itself is a product of creative freedom, rather than an absolutely self-justifying ideal. To regard subjective inwardness itself as the truth thus does not negate the subject's nihilistic submission to otherworldly values. Indeed, from Nietzsche's perspective, this ethico-religious striving--which would isolate the exister from all concrete inherence in time and becoming, seeking self-unity through a leap beyond time and history to an existentially absurd relationship with an absolutely transcendent Other--constitutes an extreme form of self and world denial.

Thus, while both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche stress the radical responsibility of the finite individual in matters of existence--for Kierkegaard the emphasis falls upon the capacity of the subject freely to define and thus realize himself as truth in negative relation to all otherness, whereas for Nietzsche, precisely this concentration into self marks the demise of genuine concrete individuality, and the adoption of a "decadent," spiritless humanism which mirrors rather than overturns metaphysical absolutism.

At the very origins of the existential movement, then, one finds already the foundations for the debate which continues to animate discussions concerning the nature of authentic individual existence. Starting from a shared recognition of the elusive yet concrete a priori of finite individuality, both thinkers struggle to articulate the significance of this being whose existence precedes and so conditions the distinctions drawn within thought. Yet each would regard the other's method of preserving the genuine finitude of the individual as inadequate. Kierkegaard, intent on maintaining the freedom of finite spirit, succeeds, Nietzsche might suggest, only in rendering all concrete content a mere function of an abstractly absolute inwardness; while Kierkegaard might deplore Nietzsche's stress upon the immediate being-in-the-world of the finite exister--his praise of "the innocence of becoming," and his relativization of all brands of thought and action as creative expressions of life itself--as a form of aesthetic detachment, and consequently as a refusal to meet the challenge to self-integration and self-understanding which confronts an authentic exister. This divergence cannot be dismissed as a simple

difference of emphasis: for each would suspect the other of being unable to wean himself from a covert dependence upon that very metaphysical standpoint and categories to which authentically finite individuality stands opposed.

Much light could be shed upon subsequent developments within existentialism by examining the relationship between these united yet mutually critical perspectives. The attempt fully to articulate the spirit and significance of finite existence continues to be determined by the tensions generated between these divergent assessments. In particular, the debate persists as to which accounts of the finite subject successfully elude the taint of the metaphysical: some contemporary thinkers insisting that a genuine ontology of existence reveals the radical isolation and freedom of the exister with respect to all concrete actuality, others arguing that such dualism merely reasserts at a new level the old metaphysical abstractions, and that what must be rediscovered is that primordial unity of the being of the exister with the finite, temporal order--a unity which is the irreducible "condition of possibility" of all metaphysical distinctions, and even of the metaphysical perspective itself.

For example, it would be fruitful to consider the "existential phenomenologists" Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger as contemporary antagonists in this debate. While both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche explore the problem of existence always from their own radically and explicitly individual standpoints, and so make no claim to universality for their elucidations of the finite subject, these later thinkers approach the question armed with a specific method for uncovering and expressing the unique being of the exister. This method, offering perhaps the key to penetrating the ontological structures of finite existence, but without reliance on a priori metaphysical principles, is the phenomenological method developed by Edmund Husserl.

Although Husserl's phenomenology emerges first as a rejection of the anti-metaphysical tendencies of both the positivism and the historicism (Weltanschauungsphilosophie) of his time, his efforts to radicalize and make explicit the implications of the Cartesian cogito and of Kant's transcendental ego are no mere reactionary return to idealism and metaphysical speculation. For while transcendental phenomenology does claim to carry forward and fulfill Cartesian

and Kantian idealism, yet it does so in the interests of bringing philosophical thinking into concrete unity with the actualities of finite subjective experience. Thus, Husserl proposes to radicalize Descartes' and Kant's recognition of the constitutive role of subjectivity in all matters of knowledge and action: in so doing transcendental phenomenology seeks to rid philosophy of its reliance upon metaphysical, transcendent entities and principles, just as surely as did Kierkegaard and Nietzsche.

Husserl opposed the dehumanizing tendencies of the merely objective, scientific approach to human affairs, while also fearing the sheer relativism of historicist philosophies: therefore, he sought a middle ground, which would neither undermine the genuine achievements of scientific reason nor require that human subjective experience be preserved only at the cost of all inherence in a unifying, universal rationality. His solution was to affirm that all human activities, including the achievements of scientific investigation, and the metaphysical/epistemological reflections of traditional philosophy, occur on the hidden ground of an overarching, "transcendental" subjectivity, which constitutes the structures of all actual human experience. Thus, even such fundamental distinctions as that between subjectivity and objectivity, between the self and the world, between "mere, subjective appearance" and absolute, transcendent reality, are a function of the constituting activity of transcendental consciousness.

Transcendental phenomenology, therefore, views even the metaphysical notion of an absolute reality, independent of human consciousness, as itself a structure within human subjectivity. Kant's distinction between phenomena and noumena, for instance, is itself a "phenomenal" distinction, generated by consciousness in its capacity of "intending" a world. Husserl is no mere subjective idealist, however: his claim is that such intentional activity is not arbitrary, but open to examination and apprehension--actually to self-examination, since we ourselves, as phenomenologists, have the ability to inspect and to describe our own transcendental experience and so directly to comprehend and describe the very being of reality.

Husserl, therefore, like his existentialist counterparts, asserts

the priority of concrete human subjectivity over the abstractions of science and metaphysics. Phenomenology is not systematic, if by systematic thinking is meant the pursuit of an a priori and final metaphysical superstructure which "explains away" concrete individual experience. Rather, phenomenology seeks continuously to deepen our understanding of the community of finite subjects as "co-constitutors" of the sphere of concrete human reality--particularly in its later phase of development insisting upon the role of temporality and culture in the constitution of our being-in-world.

Phenomenology attempts to render Kant's transcendental subject a concrete a priori, in which are united the dimensions of freedom--of transcendence with respect to all objective determinations--and of concrete individuality. In so doing, it follows the path laid down in Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, for whom also only the absolute priority of actual existence over the transcendencies of metaphysical speculation can ensure the concrete freedom of the finite individual. Phenomenology sees all being as being-for-consciousness: for the phenomenologist, being, and the meaning of being for the subject, are one, so that phenomenology, as Husserl says, is the sole genuine ontology. The phenomenological study of the "regions of being"--of scientific, historical, and philosophical meanings as intended by consciousness--and the expression and elucidation of concrete subjective experience are one and the same activity. Thus, the concrete relationship between subjectivity and the "transcendent" order, already indirectly defended by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, the phenomenologist explicitly thematizes.

But many later existential phenomenologists--among them Sartre and Heidegger--criticize Husserl's transcendental phenomenology as too abstract, too theoretical and narrowly cognitive in its appreciation of the primacy of the subject, to accommodate the richness of finite temporal experience (being). Husserl's standpoint continues to rest upon the ground of traditional metaphysics and epistemology, they insist, so that if phenomenology is truly to provide access to concrete being-in-the-world of the finite subject, its unexpressed idealist presuppositions must be expunged and a phenomenological description of the ontological structures of actual finite existence be set in its place.

In particular, Husserl's emphasis upon the transcendental ego as the a priori source and focus of all individual experience, and his insistence that the phenomenological observer can gain access to this transcendental field through freely performing an "epoché" with respect to his concrete, existential being-in-the-world, they regard as an illegitimate remnant of traditional idealism. Partly in response to such criticism, Husserl, late in his career, introduced the concept of the "Lebenswelt" (life-world) which, he declared, must be recognized as the ultimate ground and terminus for all the projects of finite existence; it is the "always pregiven" horizon within which are born even the undertakings of theoretical consciousness, and so of phenomenology itself as a culminative development within Western intellectual history. Yet the genuine significance of this concept, his critics suggest, is finally to reveal the intrinsic limits of a transcendental phenomenology, its inability to comprehend the concrete historicity of human being-in-the-world. A complete "phenomenological reduction," they insist, is impossible: the freedom of the "pour-soi," says Sartre, is always already "en situation"; in Heidegger's view, Dasein never radically transcends the finite, temporal circumstances into which it is always already "thrown."

Consequently, for existential phenomenology, the freedom of the existing individual is not primarily that of the phenomenological knower who can assume a transcendental standpoint, and so gain self-evident insight into the structure of his own existential becoming. Rather, these thinkers evoke the spirit of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, in their determination to avoid dependence upon any transcendent or transcendental standpoint which would guarantee metaphysical certitude, but thereby undermine the concrete, yet elusive self-transcendence (freedom) genuinely constitutive of individual temporal experience. Nevertheless, because they embrace Husserl's fundamental claim that phenomenology is ontology, they offer detailed and comprehensive analyses of human self-experience, and claim, as neither Kierkegaard nor Nietzsche ever could, that these non-metaphysical descriptions constitute nevertheless a body of ontological truths about concrete, finite subjectivity.

For phenomenology, the intentionality of consciousness means

that subjectivity is always in the world, and that this world is the world of that which is constituted in consciousness: in other words, the being of consciousness and the consciousness of being are one and the same. Both Sartre and Heidegger accept this basic identity, with its implication that the phenomenological standpoint is the sole philosophical perspective open to the finite subject, who always and everywhere stands in a concrete relation to an already-constituted temporal horizon. Yet each interprets the nature and possibilities of this singular standpoint in his own unique way.

For Sartre the negative, self-transcending freedom of the pour-soi (being-for-itself) constitutes the focus of ontological analysis. In its struggle to become both in-and-for-itself--to be God, in other words--this "non-substantial absolute" recalls Kierkegaard's existing individual, who seeks to potentiate concrete subjective freedom through "an absolute relation to the Absolute." However, for Sartre, the striving of the ever needful pour-soi is doomed to failure: man is a "useless passion," because the notion of a union between freedom and substantial being, in which both elements preserve their identity, is self-contradictory.

Now even though Kierkegaard takes as his starting-point the absoluteness of finite subjectivity, he opposes to subjective inwardness the radical transcendence of God, the Absolute Other; only through seeking a relationship with this metaphysical reality could the exister realize himself within existence. Thus, even though here the dualism of subject and Other is irreducible, yet Kierkegaard holds out the paradoxical possibility of a leap of faith which unites the realms of the existential and the eternal.

But, with Nietzsche, and most clearly with Husserl, the ambiguities in Kierkegaard's attempted bridge between the orders of existence and the transcendent have been made explicit, so that in Husserl's phenomenology the dualism between the existing subject and the sphere of metaphysical reality has been expunged: now, human subjectivity itself is seen as constituting the <u>meaning</u> of being, and hence, as far as finite human experience is concerned, as grounding being as such. This recognition of the subject as the <u>a priori</u> source and context of being means that such dualism as Kierkegaard maintains between <u>human</u> being and absolute, transcendent being is no longer tenable.

Thus, if Sartre's phenomenological ontology describes finite subjective existence as part of an irreducibly dualistic structure, the dichotomy he describes cannot be between the existing subject and a metaphysical Other. If the being of the pour-soi appears to phenomenological intuition as a "lack," and so as ceaselessly striving to satisfy its need, this is not because the subject needs to ground its freedom in the transcendent reality of God, but because it desires to make its own finite freedom-within-facticity absolutely self-grounding.

For the phenomenologist Sartre, the death of God is an accomplished fact: the role of God as source and ground of being is now occupied by human subjectivity itself. Yet this is a finite subjectivity--a freedom-within-facticity--which is infinitely self-transcendent, but because it is temporal never can become fully transparent to itself. Thus, while in one sense Sartre's pour-soi is God--the source of being--yet it is also always on the way to becoming God, God appearing here as in fact the ideal self, that absolutely concrete subjectivity which the radically self-transcendent pour-soi must forever lack.

Existentialism, in Sartre, thus becomes a full-blown "humanism," in the sense that the source of human alienation is no longer, as for Kierkegaard, our separation from the transcendent Being which can give human existential becoming significance. Rather, alienation is now rooted in an absolute and irreducible dualism at the heart of finite existence itself. Since precisely this dualism is what supports and gives structure to finite becoming, it can never be resolved: the Kierkegaardian understanding of the exister as engaged in a ceaseless striving is here radicalized, such that self-estrangement becomes the self-imposed truth of finite subjective existence. Such an exister avoids despair only by becoming explicitly and courageously aware of this truth, thus assuming full responsibility for himself, precisely as finite, radically temporal and therefore self-divided subjectivity.

Although Heidegger's preoccupation with the question of Being, and his rejection of Husserl's efforts to discern the a priori transcendental structures of pure consciousness, might suggest that his thought represents a turn away from the contemporary emphasis upon the primacy of human subjectivity, and a return to traditional

metaphysical and ontological pursuits, this is not the case. Heidegger shares with Husserl the view that phenomenology is ontology, and although he disputes Husserl's narrowly cognitive approach to existential questions, he nevertheless agrees that the being of the world and human being mutually imply one another. Being, and being-for-consciousness (although for Heidegger "consciousness" is not simply theoretical consciousness) are one. Thus, the radical contrast often drawn between Husserl's stress upon the knowledge of being (such that everything must be comprehended within the unity of transcendental subjectivity, since any residual "being" would point toward a recurrence of traditional metaphysical realism), and Heidegger's insistence that Being is what matters (since Husserl's talk of grounding actual finite experience in transcendental consciousness sounds like a new form of of traditional idealist metaphysics) obscures a deeper agreement between these thinkers. To be sure Heidegger (followed by Sartre) insists that his fundamental ontology is neither realist nor idealist, but arises at a point prior to such metaphysical dichotomies; but for Husserl, too, the concrete relation of consciousness and world precedes either epistemology or metaphysics, as their source and terminus. Thus, it is arguable whether, ultimately, the Heideggerian turn to the primacy of Being over consciousness actually represents a radical shift in the direction of contemporary existence philosophy, and not rather a dispute arising upon the common ground of the phenomenological view of the concrete, primordial unity of the existing subject and his world. Indeed, it can be argued that Heidegger's radical critique of the history of metaphysics, from Plato to Nietzsche, represents the working out of tendencies already implicit in Kierkegaard's turn to the standpoint of finite subjectivity, and in Husserl's insistence that phenomenology must reclaim its own foundations in the concrete, immediate experience of the life-world.

For Heidegger, then, as for Sartre, the transcendent God of metaphysics is dead: it is we alone who constitute the meaning of Being, and thus we alone who "let Being be." The only way to gain insight into Being as such, then, is through an analysis of the being which we are--of finite, temporal Dasein, the "place where Being happens." Sartre and Heidegger also share a sense of the radical finitude, the freedom-within-facticity of the exister. However, Heidegger, in his determination to secure the concreteness of this

primordial standpoint, sees in Sartre's phenomenological ontology a continued "subjectivism"--a reliance upon dualistic and quasi-metaphysical structures which must be eradicated if the full significance of man's concrete being-in-the-world is to be exploited.

Heidegger considers his own approach as a truly revolutionary return from out of the "forgetfulness of being" which has infected Western philosophy since its very inception. Not only traditional systematic philosophies, but even other existential efforts to liberate human existence from its reliance upon metaphysical presuppositions and categories, remain tied to some form of metaphysical absolute, and so do not adequately articulate the concrete truth of finite Dasein. Not until Dasein is illuminated as the temporal source and context for Being--including the being of the various metaphysical positions which have appeared throughout Dasein's history, and the very being of the possibility of metaphysics itself--can it be said that the truth of Being has shown itself.

Even that supreme opponent of absolutism and otherworldliness, Nietzsche, Heidegger includes in his destruction of metaphysics. Nietzsche fulfills the nihilistic spirit of Western metaphysics by adopting an anti-metaphysical stance which absolutizes the subjective "will to power," hence generating a final metaphysical position. Nietzsche continues to affirm the priority of the abstract, metaphysical will over Being as such, says Heidegger, and to prepares the way for the extreme nihilism of modern times, wherein all Being is thoroughly objectified, reduced to a resource, something to be shaped, ordered, and dominated in the interest of the self-preservation of the empty subjective, technocratic will.

The phenomenological ontology of Sartre, Heidegger likewise submits to analysis, and concludes that the Sartrean thesis of the priority of existence over essence, and his radical distinction between the freedom of the pour-soi and the sheer contingency of the en-soi commits him to an abstract subjectivism, an anthropological humanism which cannot express the concretely primordial being of Dasein.

And yet in his urge to overcome the "standpoint of man"--the subject or ego as the metaphysical counterpart of an objective world--Heidegger's ontology of finite Dasein in many respects reiterates themes already developed in Nietzsche's critique of metaphysical absolutism, and of ethical inwardness as a covert form

of this. For Nietzsche too the concrete unity of the temporally existing individual must constantly be asserted over any metaphysical distinction between subject and object, or between free subjective will and determined objective nature. The subjectively inward ego, with its world-dominating-and-denying freedom is as much of an abstraction for Nietzsche as it is for Heidegger. When Nietzsche speaks of genuinely creative thought not as something which I (the theoretician, the subjective, calculative ego) control and direct, but of thought as that which "thinks in me," Heidegger's sayings that authentic Dasein "lets Being be," and that thinking and poetry are akin, come to mind. In his opposition to Sartre's dualistic vision of the ceaselessly striving pour-soi, Heidegger seems to parallel Nietzsche's earlier rejection of the Kierkegaardian-style turn to radical subjective inwardness and freedom.

Nevertheless, despite his insistence that Dasein is the concrete ground of any such metaphysical abstraction as subjectivity, and despite his emphasis upon Dasein's primordial unity with Being, it remains the case that a kind of Sartrean dualism characterizes Dasein's authentic being. Like the Sartrean pour-soi, Dasein's chief obligation is not to perform any specific set of actions, but to become fully cognizant of its own responsibility for that which it is and becomes. Authentic Dasein seeks to apprehend itself, therefore, in its concrete, temporal possibility-structure, as the primordial source of the possibility of Being--and so comes resolutely to grasp as its <u>own</u> the myriad temporal possibilities of Being. Dasein, like Sartre's pour-soi, is a freedom-within-finitude; unlike Sartre, however, Heidegger sees the fullness of concrete self-realization not in the futile attempt to become being-in-and-for-itself (which is an attempt to unite two radically opposed dimensions) but in the ceaseless resolve of a <u>radically temporal</u> exister to remain standing within temporal becoming as the very fount of Being itself. Dasein--the temporally-ecstatic place where Being happens--is finite, existing always in a perspectival temporal relationship to a world whose full significance thus necessarily escapes it. Since Being as such is bound up with Dasein's very temporality-structure, then Being always transcends the immediacy of actual experience. Thus, Dasein stands essentially

oriented toward Being as the transcendent--yet, this transcendence is purely temporal, and not metaphysical. Thus, for Dasein, Being is elusive, always to be sought, precisely because temporally-ecstatic finite Dasein is always self-transcendent, always perspectival, never fully transparent to itself.

Thus, when Heidegger speaks of Being as an inexhaustible mystery in relationship to which Dasein can only comport itself with gratitude and respect, this does not signify that Being here retains some of the characteristics of the transcendent God, who in traditional thought is an infinite yet unified--eternal--source of plenitude. Rather, Being is mysterious for Dasein because it is absolutely temporal. If Dasein is the "place where Being happens," and if Dasein is radically immersed in finitude and temporality (indeed in its temporalizing activity is the source and ground of historical development) then Being itself is radically temporal, historical, and finite--and in its ceaseless becoming eludes systematic comprehension, i.e., is transcendent.

For Kierkegaard, the fundamental tension--and possible paradoxical union--between finite, temporal existence and Eternal Being served as the guide and impetus for the existential quest for selfhood. Thus, although Kierkegaard's emphasis upon the absolute primacy of the finite subject is the starting-point for that emptying of "the eternal essential Truth" of all substantial content, of all independence from the meaning-giving authority of human subjectivity, yet the Kierkegaardian perspective does retain a sense of the necessity of grounding a genuine finitude in that which is not itself finite. With Heidegger, however, the final vestiges of the traditional metaphysical distinction between the eternal and temporal, the infinite and finite, vanish. Being is temporal, temporality is finitude, Being is finitude.

Now since it has been the deepest aim of those philosophies which model themselves upon Kierkegaard's turn to finite subjectivity to rid human existence of its allegiance to nihilistic metaphysical absolutism, and to return it out of its alienated condition to concrete unity with itself and the earth, it would seem that with Heidegger this goal has been realized.

But one might ask what indeed has been accomplished by this radical finitization of both the human spirit and of transcendent

reality, and whether such finitude, which is an absolute for itself, is in fact a genuinely concrete finitude, within which the existing individual's freedom and the concrete facticity of nature, culture, and history are both unified and preserved. Perhaps one way of approaching this thorny question would be to consider to what extent such a philosophy of radical finitude grounds the possibility of personal ethical action.

Heidegger is deeply concerned to trace all distinctions, whether they be metaphysical, or ethical, back to their primordial roots in the finite, temporalizing unity of Dasein. Thus, for instance, he emphasizes the essential togetherness of the notions of "authentic" and "inauthentic," which he says are both "equiprimordial" possibilities of Dasein. Thus, no explicit recommendation to become itself, to act authentically, can be forthcoming, since Dasein in its "everydayness," in its lack of self-responsibility, is equally itself, albeit in the mode of "not being itself." And yet, unless the ideal of authentic, self-realizing activity, has some intrinsic validity, some independent merit which would motivate the finite exister to realize his possibility-structure, it is difficult to understand how the distinction between authentic and inauthentic being can even emerge. As Kierkegaard was at least intuitively aware, the existential quest for self-realization collapses into empty subjectivism, without the presence of a radical other, against which the positive ideals of existence may emerge. Thus, one might argue that Heidegger's radical ontology of human finitude brings human existence down to earth, but at the price of emptying finite becoming of all substantial value or significance.

In the light of such considerations, it is possible to ask whether the synthesis of existentialism and phenomenology, which comes to its highest expression in the thought of Heidegger, succeeds in surmounting the nihilism and abstractness of which it accuses traditional metaphysical speculation. For once finitude is postulated as an absolute, to which all else must be referred for its validation, then does not the very notion of finitude lose all significance as finite? One of the most crucial reasons for proclaiming the human spirit to be finite and temporal is to acknowledge its concrete dependence upon that which it is not; but if all depends upon the being of Dasein, if Dasein's temporality is absolute, then

surely this notion of dependence and finitude in the face of the eternal, or the infinite, loses all force? To insist that the securing of genuinely concrete finite existence demands the dissipation of the eternal into the temporal, as Heidegger suggests, seems to negate, then, not only the transcendent metaphysical order, but also that very finite being for the sake of which the negation is undertaken. The problem which suggests itself here is whether any philosophy of finitude can emerge on the ruins of metaphysical thought--or whether perhaps the relationship between finitude and the transcendent must be reconsidered in the light of the implications not of Heidegger's failure, but of his very success. This question, along with numerous others arising from the foregoing reflections, must wait upon future studies for further elaboration.

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