

1 Philosophy and Religion in the Thought of Kierkegaard

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Kierkegaard is often regarded as a precursor of existential philosophy whose religious concerns may, for philosophical purposes, be safely ignored or, at best, regarded as an unfortunate, if unavoidable, consequence of his complicity with the very metaphysics he did so much to discredit. Kierkegaard himself, however, foresaw this appropriation of his work by philosophy. 'The existing individual who forgets that he is an existing individual will become more and more absent-minded', he wrote, 'and as people sometimes embody the fruits of their leisure moments in books, so we may venture to expect as the fruits of his absent-mindedness the expected existential system – well, perhaps, not all of us, but only those who are as absent-minded as he is' (Kierkegaard, 1968, p. 110). However, it may be rejoined here, this expectation merely shows Kierkegaard's historically unavoidable ignorance of the development of existential philosophy with its opposition to the idea of system and its emphasis upon the very existentiality of the human being. How could a form of thought which, in this way, puts at its centre the very Being of the existing individual, its existentiality, be accused of absent-mindedness? Has it not, rather, recollected that which metaphysics had forgotten? Yet the impression remains that Kierkegaard would not have been

persuaded himself that such recollection could constitute remembering that one is an existing individual, for he remarks, of his own ignoring of the difference between Socrates and Plato in his *Philosophical Fragments*, 'By holding Socrates down to the proposition that all knowledge is recollection, he becomes a speculative philosopher instead of an existential thinker, for whom existence is the essential thing. The recollection principle belongs to speculative philosophy, and recollection is immanence, and speculatively and eternally there is no paradox' (Kierkegaard, 1968, p. 184n). We must ask, therefore, whether the recollection of existentiality can cure an existential absent-mindedness or remains itself a form of immanence for which there is no paradox.

I

As this last quotation might suggest, for Kierkegaard, Plato and Hegel represent the beginning and culmination of a particular project of human thought, metaphysics, which, in its claim to reveal the truth of human existence, represents a misunderstanding. This also suggests, of course, that since metaphysics is itself a human enterprise, it thereby misunderstands itself, where the misunderstanding will not be accountable in terms of a failure of metaphysical recollection. But what then is the nature of the latter, and why should it be characterized as 'immanence' for which there is no 'paradox'? And what indeed is this paradox? 'Our inquiry', says Plato in the *Republic*, 'concerns the greatest of all things, the good life and the bad life' (Plato, 1978, 578c). A man who lived the

good life would be *eudaimon*, and *eudaimonia* constitutes the end for our lives: 'We don't need to ask for what end one wishes *eudaimonia*, when one does, for that answer seems final (*telos*)' (Plato, 1975a, 205a). Yet although such an end is, Socrates tells us, 'that which every soul pursues and for its sake does all that it does', we are 'baffled and unable to apprehend its nature adequately' having 'only an intuition (*apomanteuomenos*, announced by a prophet) of it' (Plato, 1978, 505d–e). The human being, unlike the animal, has a conception of his or her own life, that they have a life to live, and so is faced with the question as to what is the good life for themselves. Only in the light of this can they determine the value of different aspects of their lives. But in order to answer this individual question, they must first determine the nature of the good life itself. It is this which humans are unable adequately to apprehend and so remain equally uncertain as to what is the best life for them as individuals. The process of recollection is intended to remove this bafflement, and its nature is revealed in the so-called ascent of the soul in the *Symposium* (201d and following).

This progress is undergone by one who pursues 'beauty in form' and who progressively realizes the nature of the end he is directed towards through the experienced inadequacies of the proposed resolutions. The end proposed by our common bodily nature, physical well-being, is apprehended by the body merely sensuously, both changing with our disposition and lacking any conception of its end in terms of which we could unify our lives. That suggested by our socialized character, social excellence, *arete*, changes as the conventions and traditions of our *polis* or land do and

lacks the capacity to say why these *nomoi* should be taken as the ground for the determination of the goal of the individual. The ends proposed by our capacity for knowledge as it reveals itself in the various *epistemai*, forms of knowledge, are multifarious and unable to justify their own primacy in relation to the end sought by human life. Yet such *epistemai* do embody self-conscious procedures of justification and are directed towards the production of truth which ultimately attains a form immune to refutation by contingencies in the timeless truth of arithmetic and geometry. But even here, although the end sought is unchangeable because timeless, such practices are unable to justify either their end *as* truth or *as* the end of human life. That end must both be timeless, and so single and unchanging, and able to bring the questioning as to the end of life to an end. Thus, higher than the particular *epistemai* is the single knowledge concerned with the very nature of knowledge and truth itself (Plato, 1975a, 210e). Such an activity, 'concerned with the final truth, the real nature of things and unchanging reality . . . is the most true knowledge' (Plato, 1975b, 55e). What, then, is revealed about the desire for the good which finds what it seeks in this activity? Men do not just react to their environment on the promptings of their instinctive desires, but act in the light thrown by a consciousness of their ends. This capacity means that they do not merely live, but have a conception of their lives, and so of a unity through which their lives would express the unity of the 'I', of the soul. It is the *ergon*, the function, of the soul to manage, rule and deliberate (Plato, 1978, 353d), and it can fulfil this function only if it consciously makes of its given nature a unity, becoming

‘one man instead of many’. The problem is to identify which of one’s capacities is to be given priority so that one’s nature as a whole achieves self-conscious unity.

For the human, existence appears as a question, and must therefore be lived in terms of the truth, the answer to the question. But this can only be done if the human knows the truth of the human, and to achieve this he or she must know the truth of truth itself. But then this activity, as human, is itself the resolution of the question, since in engaging in it the human attains to a fully self-conscious ruling of life in terms of truth. ‘Those who are uneducated and inexperienced in truth do not have a single aim and purpose in life by which all their actions, public and private, must be directed’ (Plato, 1978, 519c). It is because of this that the capacity for rule which constitutes the soul is identical with that of learning and knowledge (Plato, 1978, 581b–c): it fulfils itself in the self-knowledge which is philosophy. The philosopher is, therefore, the consummation of the nature of the human being (Plato, 1978, 490a). Socrates is a man who desires to know whether ‘I am a monster more complicated and more furious than Typhon or a gentler and simpler nature to whom a divine and quiet lot is given by nature (*physis*)’ (Plato, 1977, 230a). Such knowledge is achieved by knowing the nature of *the problem of human existence* and what can resolve it. That problem is one of self-rule, of making oneself a unity, which can be achieved through giving priority to that capacity whose end is knowledge of the nature of truth itself. Only a life organized in this way is formed knowingly in terms of truth, and so can achieve self-conscious unity: only such a life is truly self-ruling.

If man is to be autonomous, to rule himself, he must know the truth of human life and why it is the truth, and be able through this to unify his own life accordingly. But only the philosopher has, or aspires to, this self-conscious clarity, since their task is precisely to understand the truth of truth itself. Only this activity can constitute the self-conscious ruling of oneself in terms of truth. The notion of the *eidos* itself, it may be said, derives from this, since it is what we can intellectually apprehend in order to rule the world intellectually, to know it in so far as it can be known, and to rule ourselves individually and socially. As what can be intellectually apprehended, it apportions the world and man to the reach of man's capacities. The appearance within Plato's thought of the justification of man's end as contemplation of truth is just that, since its fundamental notions of truth and of the idea and its procedure of recollection, are determined by the desire for autonomy itself. In this sense, the accounts of metaphysics we find in Nietzsche and Heidegger have their validity, since they emphasize that metaphysics results from a particular understanding of human life and so cannot justify it. Recollection here is indeed, as Kierkegaard says, directed towards an immanent solution to the problem of human life.

Now, Plato's answer to the question of the truth of truth is that for there to be the truth about the world and in our thinking both must participate in intelligible form, the former as temporal and spatial instantiations of forms, the latter as recognizing such instantiations as such, and so recognizing, implicitly or explicitly, the forms themselves. It is the relation between the world and the forms which makes

the latter '*ousiai*', essences, and so our apprehension of them as of 'truths' rather than as arbitrary definitions, and so this relation, the 'for the sake of which' which unifies the realms of Becoming and timeless Being, the 'Good', is the ultimate principle in terms of which 'truth' can be understood.

For Plato, the truth of our thought about the ideas lies in an adequation between our thinking and these fully intelligible objects, just as the truth of our thought about the world lies in a correspondence between that thought and the things in the world which the ideas make possible. But this relation of correspondence only results in truth because the ideas *are* the truth about the world, that the intelligible form we apprehend is at the same time the form of the world. But what could show that this is so, that our philosophical thought really is true, rather than the drawing out of the presuppositions of a thinking about the world which we non-philosophically take to be so? We could only undermine such a doubt by showing that the notion of truth itself precludes it, so that the question of the possibility of the truth we assume non-philosophically is at the same time the question of the notion of truth itself. The intelligibility of reality as we non-philosophically take it to be for Hegel is not a matter of a harmony, a correspondence, between thought and reality, but a moment in the dynamic which reveals what is true only in the progressive emergence of the notion of truth itself. That notion reveals itself as the identity of subject and object in which reality knows itself, so that its forms as external nature and man's own in his historical development reveal themselves as *for* this absolute knowing. Since absolute knowing has its locus in the human, it

constitutes man's own end, his truth: his truth is to be the fulfilled truth of reality as a whole.

The Platonic idea of the Good, the relation of purposiveness which binds the temporal and the intelligible into a whole, is identified by Hegel with the activity of reason itself. The timelessly true is the principle of rationality of the world which comes to its own self-consciousness in human philosophical knowing. It is, therefore, both *ousia* in the Platonic sense, existing 'solely through itself and for its own sake. It is something absolutely self-sufficient, unconditioned, independent, free as well as being the supreme end unto itself' (Hegel, 1984, I, p. 379) and, at the same time, spirit. 'Spirit *is* in the most complete sense. The absolute or highest being belongs to it. But Spirit is . . . only in so far as it is *for* itself, that is, in so far as it posits itself or brings itself forth; for it is only as activity . . . in this activity it is knowing' (ibid. I. p. 143). The rationality of the world is both substance, an intellectually apprehensible order which 'is' in a more than merely temporal sense, and subject, for it is essentially a thinking which must come to know itself. Reality becomes self-transparent in man's absolute knowing. And there man attains true self-consciousness, finding *within himself*, in the form of human history, the ground which can justify his cognitive, practical and political activities, for these represent the concrete manifestations of Spirit's universalizing activity which are for its own self-knowledge. And man can, in absolute knowing, become self-conscious spirit.

Thus, for both Plato and Hegel, man's highest form of activity is philosophical knowing in which the ground, in

terms of which all other forms of knowledge and truth can be understood, is discovered as at one with man himself. For Plato, this ground is the idea of the good, of the purposiveness which binds together all that can be said to be and which provides us with the notions of a final truth and unchanging being, and which reveals itself as the ground of the 'divine element' within man, his intelligence, his capacity to participate in the timeless in its *appropriate* form, *as* intelligible, and so reveal the purposiveness which binds the temporal and timeless together. For Hegel, this purposiveness becomes the activity of unifying thought itself, which reveals external nature as *for* the universalizing activity of man's scientific knowing, and man's own as to be imprinted with the image of man *as* such a universalizing being, and so as self-determining. Man, as the being who is capable of knowing his end and acting accordingly, knows his nature as such only in the activity which brings this capacity to fulfilment. And that can take place only in absolute knowing, when external and human nature have been revealed as they *are* through the coming to self-consciousness of the organizing activity of reason. Man does not just possess a divine element, but can in such knowing become God as the ultimate ground of all being, self-conscious Spirit: 'God is spirit, the activity of pure knowing' (ibid. III, p. 283).

II

For metaphysics, the question which our existence is for us is to be answered through a recollection of what is already implicit within that existence, whether this takes the form of

Platonic dialectic or the historical dialectic through which Spirit recollects itself. Metaphysics seeks to answer the question by providing a ground, a determination of the nature of the human, through which a concrete form of human life can be justified as life's end as being the fulfilment of that nature. Man, as the being who, unlike the animal, faces existence as a question, must fulfil his nature through a fully self-conscious living in terms of the answer and so in terms of truth. But such self-consciousness can exist only where he *knows* his nature, his Being, and so what justifies it as such: and only philosophical activity within which the truth of truth is known apparently satisfies these demands. Since that activity is recollection, the ultimate ground in terms of which man can understand his own Being and that of all else is implicit within human life itself. Man discovers the ground in terms of which he can live in a truly self-conscious manner within himself and so is capable of autonomy. It is because of this that, referring to Hegel, Kierkegaard remarks in his *Journals* that 'Philosophy is the purely human view of the world, the human stand-point' (Kierkegaard 1970, entry 3253) which tends 'towards a recognition of Christianity's harmony with the universally human consciousness' (ibid. entry 3276). It leads, that is, towards an identification of the human with the divine, a process which has its roots in the Platonic conception of a divine element in man's nature. Hegel's thought, for Kierkegaard, is the culmination of this tradition of philosophy, within which the nature of that human project becomes transparent, for there the human being thinking 'the system of the universe' (Hegel, 1984, I, p. 101) becomes divine. In such thinking he becomes one

with self-conscious spirit, and that is God (Hegel, 1984, III, p. 284). Because the problem of existence is one to be resolved by thought revealing what is already implicit there, Kierkegaard says that metaphysics assumes 'that if only the truth is brought to light, its appropriation is a relatively unimportant matter, something which follows as a matter of course' (Kierkegaard, 1968, p. 24).

Kierkegaard's critique of this general project, however, begins with his insistence that it is just this matter of appropriation which *poses* for us the question of the truth of existence: 'the inquiring, speculating and knowing subject . . . raises a question of truth, but he does not raise the question of a subjective truth, the truth of appropriation and assimilation' (ibid. p. 23).

The truth which metaphysics seeks is to be revealed through reflection, and having been apprehended is then to be *lived*. But to say this is immediately to mark a difference between the categories appropriate *within* reflective thought and those concerning our *relation* to it through which it becomes part of our life. 'If a man occupies himself all his life through with logic, he would nevertheless not become logic: he must therefore himself exist in different categories' (ibid. p. 86). These categories are those of 'subjectivity', the relation of the individual to his activities and relationships and so forth which issues from the relation he has to his life as a whole. If an individual occupies himself with logic, we may ask not merely what results ensue but *how* he involves *himself* with it. This question initially prompts an account of the sort of commitment he has to the activity. But this in turn raises a question about that relation itself: is it of the *right* kind? The

individual must relate *himself* to this activity as he must to *any* activity or relationship or to anything which occurs to him. Is his form of relationship, then, appropriate for a being subject to such a necessity *throughout his life*? The individual has a conception of his life as a whole, that he has a life to lead, and the question as to the truth of existence relates to this, through which an appropriate relation to activities and relationships *within* life can be determined. But for the individual, his life as a whole cannot be present: 'life constitutes the task. To be finished with life before life has finished with one, is precisely not to have finished the task' (ibid. p. 147). One cannot, therefore, relate to one's life as a whole in terms of a *result* or *fulfilment*, for this is to treat life as a task which can be completed, even if only ideally. But this is precisely what metaphysics does, understanding life's task as the achievement of knowledge of the whole or as the end of the process whereby the whole achieves explicit rationality: 'objective thought translates everything into results, subjective thought puts everything into process and omits results—for as an existing individual he is constantly in process of coming to be' (ibid. p. 68).

Metaphysics in construing life as having an immanent goal fails to recognize that the wholeness of life from the point of view of the *living*, the *existing* individual cannot be so conceived, and it is only from this point of view that the question as to the meaning of life arises. Its view is a result of seeing the question of human life 'objectively', a relation which we as living beings may take up in relation to past human existence, as when we concern ourselves with the objective truth about historical events, but which we

cannot take up in relation to our *own*. ‘Hegel . . . does not understand history from the point of view of becoming, but with the illusion attached to pastness understands it from the point of view of a finality that excludes all becoming’ (ibid. p. 292n). The metaphysical project treats human life in the mode of pastness and only so can it think of it in terms of a final result. But whereas it makes sense to relate to the past in terms of disinterested inquiry and so in terms of the objective truth, such a relation is only possible for a being who has a quite different relation to his own life. ‘Whenever a particular existence has been relegated to the past, it is complete, has acquired finality, and is in so far subject to a systematic apprehension . . . but for whom is it so subject? Anyone who is himself an existing individual cannot gain this finality outside existence which corresponds to the eternity into which the past has entered’ (ibid. p. 108). His historical inquiry is an activity he engages with and to which he relates: but this latter relation cannot be one of the ‘disinterested’ inquiry through which he addresses the objects of his research, but one we can only understand in ‘subjective’ categories. That is, we must understand such a relation in terms of life as it is related to by the one who is *living* it and not in terms of the relation of a living being to a life which is not his own. The comedy of the System, Kierkegaard says, is that it forgets that philosophy has to be written by human beings (ibid. p. 109) who have necessarily a different *kind* of relation to their own lives than they can have to anything else: ‘the only reality to which an existing individual may have a relation that is more than cognitive is his own reality’ (ibid. p. 280).

How, then, are we to understand existence when it is seen 'subjectively', that is, when it is a matter of an individual regarding his own life? Kierkegaard's answer to this is: as 'becoming'. Whereas objectively life is regarded as if it were in the past, completed and so surveyable by the contemplative gaze of the philosopher, subjectively life is not completable, since one is not done with it until it is done with one. From the existing individual's viewpoint, his own life appears as 'constantly in process of becoming' (ibid. p. 79) and not as directed towards an end. To live, therefore, consistently in terms of this subjective view, 'it is essential that every trace of an objective issue should be eliminated' (ibid. p. 115) and so all trace of living as if an immanently defined end could give significance to one's existence as a whole. To do otherwise is not simply an error of the metaphysical interpretation of life, but characterizes human beings' relations to their lives generally, in ways I shall note in a moment: 'It is enough to bring a sensuous man to despair, for one always feels a need to have something finished and complete' (ibid. p. 79). But to live clear-sightedly in terms of the subjective view, to live as an *existing* individual, is to live one's life *as* constantly in process of becoming, and so not toward an immanent goal (ibid. p. 284). Whereas objectively, one's future is seen in the 'illusion attached to pastness' as if it were directed towards an end surveyable from the present and so *closed*, subjectively the future is open. For the living individual, his future is not already mapped out, tending towards an end: 'The incessant becoming generates the uncertainty of earthly life, where everything is uncertain' (ibid. p. 79). To live related to

the essential openness of the future alters too the character of the past. To be so related is to 'strive infinitely' (ibid. p. 84) so that one's concrete activities are not dependent upon the realization of some finite or ideal goal for their significance. As no such goal can have such ultimate significance, the past, whether of achievement or its lack, can have no such significance either, but is merely the base from which one's present striving into the openness of the future takes place. The present, then, is where the past is taken over as one's *own* and so in relation to the absolute openness of one's future. We shall see what this means more concretely for Kierkegaard later.

His critique of metaphysics rests, then, on the contrast between the objective conception of life, where it is seen as if it were already in the past and so complete and surveyable, and the subjective, the way one's life is seen from *within* it, from the point of view of the one who has to live it. And it might appear that Kierkegaard analyses the difference in purely temporal terms. Life as 'becoming' involves, as 'constant striving', the non-ending taking over of one's past into an open future, whereas life objectively conceived is at best progress toward a predetermined future. But it has to be emphasized that Kierkegaard's understanding of these temporal notions is *religious* or ethico-religious: 'all essential knowledge is essentially related to existence. Only ethical and ethico-religious knowledge has an essential relationship to the existence of the knower' (ibid. p. 177). That is, for Kierkegaard, the individual who truly lives as 'becoming' relates to the future as open only in so far as this relation is one to the Infinite or God, and his 'constant striving'

constitutes therefore a relation to God, an offering up of his life to the Deity. So that he remarks in the *Journals* (Kierkegaard, 1970, entry 1050): 'To be contemporary with oneself (therefore neither in the future of fear, or of expectation nor in the past) ... is ... the Godrelationship'. A present within which one takes over one's past in relation to the open future is only possible as such a God-relation since 'the Deity ... is present as soon as the uncertainty of all things is thought infinitely' (Kierkegaard, 1968, p. 80): that is, the future is only truly open through one's relation to God. And Kierkegaard is far from believing, therefore, that life does not have a *telos*. One who lives his life as always becoming is, because this requires a relation to God, directed towards the end bestowed by God, an 'eternal happiness', although this is, unlike the end understood by the objective views of life, both unattainable through our own efforts and inconceivable as an ideal extrapolation from them and so does not close off the horizon of the future.

I shall return to these notions later. But must not the suspicion immediately arise here that Kierkegaard is involved in re-instating precisely those 'objective' concepts he has shown to be incompatible with the subjective standpoint? Life does not have an end within it, but is now said to have one beyond it. And in that case, life is surely part of an order which is determinate and fixed, even if, unlike the order of metaphysics, it is one we cannot apprehend: 'Reality itself is a system for God; but it cannot be a system for an existing spirit. System and finality correspond to one another, but existence is precisely the opposite of finality' (ibid. p. 107). But given Kierkegaard's critique of the

objectivity of metaphysical conceptions, why should the existing individual who understands his existence as constant becoming without a finite end believe in an infinite one, guaranteed by the author of an order beyond our comprehension? Is not this religious construction a last vestige of the hold of objective thinking? Might not we hope to move to a properly existential understanding of existence freed of the metaphysical notions of a determined end within a given order? Certainly Heidegger did.

III

Despite the paucity of references to Kierkegaard in *Being and Time* and Heidegger's earlier works, it is clear that he played a major role in the formation of Heidegger's thought. Heidegger's own account of his relation to Kierkegaard is given in a footnote where he remarks that whereas Kierkegaard 'explicitly seized upon the problem of existence as an existential problem, and thought it through in penetrating fashion', he was prevented from an adequate philosophical interpretation of that problem through his adherence to traditional metaphysical conceptions 'the existential problematic' being 'so alien to him' (Heidegger, 1967, p. 494). That is, Kierkegaard thought about the problem of existence as the problem the individual faces in relation to his own existence, and sees certain possible ways in which this may be conceived and resolved by the individual: aesthetically, ethically or religiously. But he is prevented from seeing how the ontic possibilities he discusses are grounded in the Being of human being, and hence from apprehending

a more radical interpretation of what those possibilities are and their relation to that Being, through his use of ontological notions which are drawn from intra-worldly beings and are quite inappropriate for the discussion of that being which is in its 'essence', Being-in-the-World.

Heidegger's problem of existentiality concerns the being of human being, that which makes possible the concrete problem or problems we can identify at the individual level, and it is addressed within the context of an attempt to reactivate the question of Being (Heidegger, 1978, p. 41). But that question involves the problem of existentiality only because it is a 'radicalization' of an essential tendency that belongs to man's Being itself (ibid. p. 46). In order for us to relate in any way, theoretically or practically, to 'nature, history, God, space, number', in fact to anything whatever, we must already have an understanding in some way of the Being of these beings (Heidegger, 1982, p. 10). 'Something like Being reveals itself to us in the understanding of Being, an understanding that lies at the root of all of our comportment toward beings' (ibid. p. 16). Such comportment toward beings of whatever kind is a mode of Being of a particular being, ourselves. But whereas other beings have the understanding of their Being in another being, the human, we do not. Rather, we must understand ourselves in our Being: we have an essential relation to our own Being (Heidegger, 1978, p. 54). And as all our comporting towards other beings is something *we* do, it involves at the same time such a relation of ourselves to our own Being. Now, the problem of existence raised at the existential level is the question about the meaning of my individual existence, directed towards guiding the

conduct of my life. As a relation towards my existence, the question will already involve some understanding of my Being, the Being of human being. The possibility of my conceiving and responding adequately to the existential question will depend on the adequacy of my pre-understanding of the Being of the human. And that means, in turn, on the adequacy of my understanding of Being: 'the question of Being, the striving for an understanding of Being, is the basic determinant of existence . . . the question of Being is in itself . . . the question of man' (Heidegger, 1984, p. 16). Of course, it is not necessary for me to be able to *interpret* this understanding of Being; that task is one for philosophy, for the existential interpretation of the Being of man in the service of recalling us to the question of Being. Nevertheless, it remains the case that the existential 'problem of existence' depends for its adequate understanding on an adequate pre-ontological understanding of Being. In this way, however radical a departure from traditional philosophical conceptions Heidegger's thought represents, it remains within the context of what Heidegger elsewhere had called the 'human's free appropriation of his whole existence' (Heidegger, 1976, p. 10) which Kierkegaard himself identified as the peculiarly philosophical project: 'the ignorant person merely needs to be reminded in order, by himself, to call to mind what he knows. The truth is not introduced into him but was in him' (Kierkegaard, 1974a, p. 9). The problem of existence raised at the existential level involves an understanding, although not necessarily conceptually articulated, of existentiality, the Being of the human, and that, in turn, of an understanding of Being.

An understanding of our Being is involved in any relating of ourselves to other beings, and so in whatever we do: we always live under the auspices of some understanding of our Being, of the possibilities of human being. Such a Being is not something we are related to as something to be apprehended, but as something to *be*. We are the sort of being which has its Being to be: we have to live our understanding of our Being. Since it is through man that the Being of other beings is disclosed, whilst his Being is disclosed through himself in having to be that Being, Heidegger calls human being *Da-sein*, *to be* there. As its Being is always to be for *Dasein*, that Being cannot lie in some determinate state or condition which could be actualized in some particular *Dasein*: *Dasein* has always to be its Being and is never finished until it ceases to exist. And as it always has its Being to *be*, *Dasein* is essentially *concerned* about its own Being, which means too that its Being is in each case *mine*: that each *Dasein* must live itself its own understanding of its Being.

Nevertheless, although we must always live our understanding of Being, we do not in the first place and generally do so through an explicit attention to that Being. Rather our initial understanding lies implicit in the way we exist prior to any reflective appropriation of ourselves or of the things we encounter, that way in which we firstly and for the most part give ourselves immediately and passionately to the world. *Dasein* is Being-in-the-World. The world is that wherein we dwell, the familiar environment made up not of things but of relations of purposiveness. Only in so far as we exist within these relations do we encounter things at all. In so

far as we are in these relations in the appropriate way, living purposively, the things we encounter, and the relations themselves, are there in an unobtrusive and unthought manner.

Since *Dasein* has its Being to be, and so such a Being is always 'mine' rather than a 'what' which I might merely apprehend, the question arises as to 'who' this Being is which I make mine. Within the form of existence which we most immediately are, I take over my Being as a Being which *anyone* could take over. I am what I do, so that I am my world, the particular context of purposive relations which is familiar and mine: I am a shoemaker, teacher, banker, and that others can be and are. In a similar way I enjoy myself, make judgments, and so on, as 'one' does, in a way available *for* anyone. I am my Being as something already given and familiar which can be taken over by me as by anyone: an already existing environment of modes of work, customs, opinions into which I fit myself. It is only on the basis of such a mode of existing, immediately absorbed in the world of purposive relations, that any more reflective appropriation of my own Being and that of things revealed in the world can take place.

In its immediate form of existing, *Dasein* is simply absorbed in its world, understanding its Being unreflectively in terms of what it can do there. It understands itself, that is, in terms of its success and failure in living within the purposive relations of its world. This inauthentic self-understanding, not drawn from the Being of *Dasein* itself, has an essential temporal structure: *Dasein* awaits the revelation of itself in what the future may bring in terms of success or failure, lives a present absorbed in its world, and

has behind it a past which, however much it may be a matter of satisfaction, regret or indifference, is something finished and determinate.

Within everydayness, *Dasein's* self is reflected back to it from what happens or has happened in its world. But this is only possible in so far as *Dasein* is Being-in-the-world, is as absorbed in the purposive relations of world. And it can be so absorbed in these relations, in the in-order-to which reveals equipment and materials, the for-which of the work, and the for-the-sake-of which refers to *Dasein's* potentialities themselves, in so far as *Dasein* itself has an essentially temporal structure, which in the world takes on the particular mode of expecting itself from within its world. But *Dasein* has to *be* its Being, and it has to so long as it is. Hence, its *Being* cannot achieve concretion in any state or condition which could be granted to it by what occurs in the world. Understanding one's Being in this way removes the possibility of understanding it in terms of something to be manifested, in the way of other beings, from within the world. *Dasein* realizes it is not to be identified with any concrete possibility its world offers, but that it is the simple possibility of having to *be* its world. Within the world, and understanding itself not from itself, inauthentically, *Dasein* is at home, in the familiar. Understanding itself from itself, it recognizes itself, however, as '*unheimlich*', not at home and essentially so: as having, not to be *in* its world, absorbed in its familiar relations, but to *be* its world. Such a realization takes place only out of its inauthentic absorption in the world, so that *Dasein* must take over authentically, in terms of its own Being, that Being which it already inauthentically has been.

Such authentic existing, resoluteness, is the pre-eminent form of human temporality. *Dasein* does not await itself in what the future may bring in the world, but always comes towards itself: that is, it takes over what it has been as what must always be taken over, so that the future is open, the past a source of possibility and the present that within which a new revelation of a possibility of its past can occur. *Dasein* takes over what it has been, its world, so that it exists in relation to the world in a new way, in terms of its *own* potentiality. It takes over the concrete possibilities provided by its world but *as* possibilities and not as finished modes of being into which *Dasein* must fit. It appropriates its past not as something finished, but as possibility: and this it can only do by relating to the past as open, by maintaining it as possibility. Since its world is a common one, such engagement with the world constitutes the renewal of a common heritage, a tradition.

To understand one's Being as temporality is to radically distinguish it from the being of intra-worldly beings. It is to realize that one can only *be* that Being as one's Being in the appropriation of the past without issue. And that can only take place if the past is regarded as itself without issue: not as finished and determinate, but as constant possibility of being taken over. To understand oneself in this way is to engage in one's past as an ever renewable source of possibility, to engage in the constant renewal of one's heritage. It is in this that genuinely new creation lies and which enables man to have a history (Heidegger, 1985, p. 279). Man has a history because he is historical: that is, exists as a being which must constantly take over its past as

possibility. Of course, for the most part human being must exist inauthentically, simply living at home in the familiar world. But he lives in accordance with his Being, lives it *as* his Being, in creation, in the bringing forth of what is new out of the possibilities made available by his past. In this way he lives his Being as '*unheimlich*', as essentially not at home in the world. Man is not a being among other beings: rather he is as the appropriation of what has been, as *existing* world, within which any other being can have its Being, its own temporal mode.

This may indeed appear as a thinking into the Being of human being which underlies Kierkegaard's criticisms of Hegel in terms of the 'existing individual', a thinking Kierkegaard himself was unable to carry out, being still in the grip of certain metaphysical conceptions, but however tempting such an interpretation may be for philosophy, it is not, I think, compatible with Kierkegaard's own thought.

IV

If for Heidegger philosophy has forgotten that Being is a question and so that man is characterized by historicity, for Kierkegaard it has forgotten 'what it means to be a human being. Not, indeed, what it means to be a human being in general, for this is the sort of thing that one might even induce a speculative philosopher to agree to; but what it means that you and I and he are human beings, each one for himself' (Kierkegaard, 1968, p. 109). The philosophical conception of the problem of existence which the individual faces places the conception of the essence of human being at

its centre: only if we have an adequate, even if unarticulated, understanding of this can we resolve the problem in the required way. The problem of existence is first and foremost that of 'what it means to be a human being in general', and only through that what it means for me or you to be a human being.

Regarded, however, from the point of view of the one who has to live it, life appears as a constant task which cannot, therefore, be understood in terms of a fulfilment whether actual or ideal. But if this removes the possibility of thinking of life in terms of an immanent *telos*, it equally removes that of thinking of life in terms of temporal process, although Kierkegaard himself, of course, did not have to consider this philosophical possibility. That possibility remains subject to what Kierkegaard identified as 'the fundamental modern confusion' which 'is to have transformed the communication of capability and oughtness capability into the communication of knowledge. The existential has disappeared' (Kierkegaard, 1970, entry 653). The existential as the relation the individual has to her or his own life must be understood in terms of the *passion* with which life is lived, and in terms of this, the very conception of living in accordance with a notion of the Being of the human is seen to represent an inadequate form of passion, and so one which retains a vestige of the 'objective'. We can see why this should be by briefly reviewing the three main forms which human existing can take according to Kierkegaard, the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious.

In relation to the question which one's life is for oneself, one may look towards the achievement and

maintenance of some condition constituting an overriding goal for the rest of one's life, as power, position or wealth, or, more modestly, towards some set of material and personal circumstances with which one could be content. Either way, however, these conditions have their significance for us only in so far as we desire them. The aesthetic view of life tries, that is, to understand what gives meaning to our lives as a whole as lying in the dispositions with which we find ourselves. Nevertheless, as facts about ourselves, these are subject to change: if we cease to desire riches, say, then we will alter our understanding of where life's meaning lies. What gives significance to the particular proclivities that at any time fill this role, therefore, does not lie within them, but is rather given to them by ourselves. Yet, at the same time, such a granting of significance within the aesthetic condition is merely a response to the dominance of some inclination we find ourselves with, so that as this changes so does our conception of what is important in life. Within the aesthetic form of existence, that is, I must determine what proclivity is to play this role, whilst, at the same time I *evade* recognition of this necessity: I find the significance of my life *determined* in a certain way, yet decline to recognize the essential role of my consent in this. Aesthetic existence involves, therefore, a self-deception: I have always chosen, but the very mode of my life, lived in terms of the satisfaction of my given dispositions, seeks to deny this. If I reflect, however, I realize both that whatever proclivity has played the dominant role in my life has not been explicitly chosen in terms of its adequacy to resolve the question, of the meaning of life, which is to be resolved, and that *no* given disposition *could* answer this,

since the facts as to what is given may change at any time but the question would remain.

Since it is my capacity for choice which gave their role to my given dispositions in determining life's significance, it may appear that the question can only be resolved if I choose, not in terms of their predominance at any time, but in terms of choice itself. The ethical individual 'can impart to (his history) continuity, for this it acquires only when it is not the sum of all that has happened to me but is my own work' (Kierkegaard, 1959, II, p. 255). He or she has choice itself as the measure for life as a whole. I choose, that is, not in terms of what my dispositions at any time suggest and so as directed towards the achievement and maintenance of certain conditions, but in terms of my capacity for choice itself, and so unconditionally. The resolution to the problem lies in impressing whatever is given, both by one's nature and by what happens in life, with oneself: 'The great thing is not to be this or that but to be oneself' (ibid. II, p. 180). This is done by choosing oneself, and so rendering oneself independent of external or internal conditions which may or may not come about. One undertakes unconditional choices which raise aspects of one's given nature to the level of things chosen by oneself: marriage in relation to one's sexuality, vocation in relation to one's talents, and so on. And one freely appropriates everything which happens in one's life, both the joyful and the sorrowful. In this way, by imposing unconditional choice upon one's life, 'we win through to an entirely individual human being' (Kierkegaard, 1968, p. 227), since in so doing I impress the facticities of my life with the very *form* of the 'I' which I am

throughout my life. Whereas the categories of the aesthetic view are those of fortune, misfortune and fate, those of the ethical are victory and defeat, of myself as self-determining over my factually given dispositions and the events of my life.

But can this truly be the answer to the question of what can give significance to my life *as a whole*? Is there not rather a hidden complicity between the aesthetic and the ethical views of life? The very structure of the ethical project, to gain a victory over myself, indicates that there is. The ethical determines what can give meaning to my life as a whole in terms of my capacity for choice, for imposing unconditional choice upon myself and holding to it. But this, in so far as it is a capacity which I have, is still a *part* of my life, a part of that which is to be given meaning as a whole, just as is any dominant desire within the aesthetic view. The ethical still conceives life objectively, in terms of a goal whether factual or ideal, projected by man's own capacities. But no such part can give meaning to the whole, for what is it which gives meaning to my exercise of freedom?

The question which human life faces us with is, as far as life itself is concerned, paradoxical: life cannot determine its own significance in terms of itself. This realization compels the recognition that meaning can only be given to one's life as a whole by relating it *as a whole* to an *absolute* Good. An absolute Good is one to which I can relate my *whole* existence, in terms of which I recognize that nothing I can do, and so no capacity I may or could possess, and nothing that happens to me can give meaning to my life as a whole. One can know nothing concrete about such an

absolute Good (Kierkegaard, 1974a, p. 55) since it does not lie in the exercise, fulfilment or result of any human capacity, except that to relate to it requires that one wills one's life in its totality absolutely, unconditionally, without looking for any result, and hence for anything, including one's victory over oneself, which one would deem good. And this means that one's activity in relation to this good *cannot* be regarded as means towards its achievement. Rather, recognition of this absolute good can, in so far as it results in one's activity, only take the form of the *negative* movement of removing within one's life the illusion of a humanly projected goodness, and so ultimately of total self-renunciation: 'in self-renunciation one understands one is capable of nothing' (Kierkegaard, 1962, p. 355).

This 'absolute Good' for the individual is what Kierkegaard means by an 'eternal happiness'. But this notion cannot play a similar role to that of 'happiness' within the aesthetic and ethical forms of existence. There it would make sense to ask in what happiness consists, for it would be used to refer to some state either attainable *within* life or as an ideal which one must conceive in order to pursue. But the notion of an 'eternal happiness' merely identifies 'the good which is attainable by venturing everything' (Kierkegaard, 1968, p. 382) in relation to which our activity cannot be the utilization of means towards the achievement of an end. Therefore, Kierkegaard says 'the resolved individual does not even will to know anything more about this *telos* than that it exists, for as soon as he acquires some knowledge about it, he already begins to be retarded in his striving' (Kierkegaard, 1968, p. 353). To will to 'know' something about it is to construe

the 'absolute Good' as if it were something we could achieve or approach of our own powers and so need a prior conception in order to direct our activity. But the absolute Good is that which requires us to venture everything and only so can it give significance to one's *whole* life. It cannot therefore be construed as within the reach of our powers, whatever they may be, which are necessarily a *part* of the life which is to be given up in its *entirety* to this good. What could give such significance must, therefore, have for us an essentially *negative* form: all we can know about it is that it cannot be known and all we can say about it is that it requires us to venture everything.

An 'eternal happiness' marks this absolute *telos* for the individual, his absolute Good. The Goodness of this good is that to which the individual must relate in order to have his own absolute end, and this is the notion of absolute goodness itself, God. 'God is a highest conception, not to be explained in terms of other things, but explicable by exploring more and more profoundly the conception itself' (Kierkegaard, 1968, p. 197). That absolute Goodness, the measure for my life *as a whole*, can, that is, be related to only in 'the mode of absolute devotion', and that to which we can be so related is 'God'. 'Self-annihilation is the essential form for the God-relationship' (*ibid.* p. 412). I cannot, therefore, relate to God through my understanding, as if I could *grasp* the measure for my life as a whole and its reason and so set about making my life in accordance with it, since then my activity would be a means towards the achievement of the individual good determined by that measure. God is, seen from the point of view of reason, the

'limit to which reason repeatedly comes', the 'unknown with which reason collides' (Kierkegaard, 1974, I, p. 55) since, as the measure for life in its entirety, all reason can know is that God requires, *as God*, the *whole* of life, and therefore the recognition by the individual 'that he is nothing before God, or to be wholly nothing and to exist thus before God' (Kierkegaard, 1968, p. 412). The relation to God requires the sacrifice of our reason and understanding in the sense of a giving up of their claim to be able to establish and reveal a measure for life as a whole which human powers may achieve or advance towards: 'The contradiction which arrests (the understanding) is that a man is required to make the greatest possible sacrifice, to dedicate his whole life as a sacrifice – and wherefore? There is indeed no wherefore' (Kierkegaard, 1972, p. 121). The limit of our reason is to reveal this contradiction, the impossibility of a human resolution to the problem of the meaning of existence, and that the relation to the absolute measure requires the active giving up of such presumption. Such an understanding of existence, which really does encompass life as whole, is, therefore, according to Kierkegaard, essentially religious.

The apprehension of the relation to God as constituting *the* meaning for human life is the religious understanding. It has two forms for Kierkegaard. The universally religious, or 'religion A', understands what this requires in human terms, a turning away from all humanly determined goods as constituting *the* good. It thus conceives of the demand as one of 'infinite resignation', an active offering up of human life as it is lived to God. This involves seeing the task of life as one of the constant exercise of the

renunciation of absolute concern with finite results, and so of dying away from the world: 'the individual who sustains an absolute relationship to the absolute *telos* may very well exist in relative ends, precisely in order to exercise the absolute relationship in renunciation' (Kierkegaard, 1968, p. 367). Christianity, or 'religion B', goes beyond this, by involving Faith, the belief that, having offered one's self to God in the striving of infinite resignation, it will be given back, so that one's life is no longer characterized by striving against one's tendencies to will relatively, but by an absolute purity within the world. 'Faith, after having made the movements of infinity . . . makes those of finiteness' (Kierkegaard, 1974b, p. 48). Christianity is the 'absolute religion' for Kierkegaard because it recognizes in its most radical form the difference between man and God (Kierkegaard, 1970, entry 46), the nothingness of man before God: that nothing that man does, not even 'infinite resignation', can have any value unless it is given by God to man. And the transformation of the individual to absolute purity is not something which the individual can accomplish of himself, since it involves a *total* transformation of the self away from relative to absolute willing.

We can now see why Kierkegaard stresses the centrality, in relation to the problem of existence, of the *fact* that *I* exist, rather than of a conception of the nature of human being. The problem of existence is faced by the individual in having to live his life *as a whole*, as *the* life which *he* or *she* has to live. This problem cannot be addressed by reference to some aspect of human existence in terms of which the individual could organize his life, since any such aspect is

only a part of what must be given meaning as a whole. Of course, philosophy attempts to deal with this by trying to show how such a mode of existence fulfils human nature, 'what it means to be a human being in general'. But the pursuit of an essence of human nature, even if this opposes a metaphysical conception of Being, is motivated by the understanding that the problem of existence at the individual level *can* be resolved by referring to some particular mode of existence as an exercise of human powers, since to speak of the Being of human being is precisely to speak of what could justify appeal to such a mode in solving that problem. But if reference to *no* such aspect of an individual's existence, neither, for example, his intelligence, his reason, nor his capacity for creation, can *in principle* resolve that problem, then the pursuit of the Being of human being is misplaced. The religious understanding claims that the problem is such that this is indeed the case, that the individual can only relate to his life *as a whole* in recognizing an absolute Good to which life *in toto* can be given: and one can only express such a recognition in self-renunciation. Human being does not have an essence, a Being, for his existence is a problem which *cannot* be resolved by referring to such a Being. It is this philosophy forgets: 'what it means that you and I and he are human beings, each one for himself (Kierkegaard, 1968, p. 109). It forgets the relation the individual has to his own life, and so the subjective categories concerned with the passion with which life is lived. The problem of human life is of how the individual can *commit* his life in its entirety, and the resolution of this precludes the very *form* of the philosophical response which attempts, in

terms of a determination of man's Being, to give a privilege to certain of man's own powers. Kierkegaard does not give an account of a problem at the existential level which can only properly be addressed through an adequate understanding of the existentiality, the Being of human being, since no such understanding could allow a resolution of the problem that account is directed towards. What that problem requires is giving up the *presumption* of such an understanding to resolve it, since it requires, quite simply, the giving up of *all* human presumption to be able to give meaning to human life. It is not merely that religious existence is the 'mortal enemy' of 'a human's free appropriation of his whole existence' (Heidegger, 1976, p. 21) but rather that the problem which human existence is shows that no such 'free appropriation' is possible.

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