

The Possible Self: An Exposition and Analysis of Metaphysical
Themes in Kierkegaard's Theological Anthropology

DPhil Thesis submitted by
Geoffrey D. Dargan
Regent's Park College, University of Oxford

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Abstract (short)

This thesis proposes that Søren Kierkegaard's thought—in particular, his theological anthropology—is undergirded by an inchoate metaphysics of modality. It focuses on the concept of possibility (Danish: *Mulighed*), arguing that possibility is a primary ingredient of the Kierkegaardian self and serves as a kind of 'engine' for the development of the individual before God. Accordingly, viewing Kierkegaard's works through the lens of possibility is a fruitful way to gain new insights into his beliefs, and clarifies what he sought to express in his authorship.

Kierkegaard, I argue, formulates a multilayered account of possibility that, while not abandoning metaphysics, re-frames possibility existentially, in terms of what the self may actually become, not only in and for itself but also in relation to God. One's selfhood and one's relation to God both require an ontology of possibility. His existential concerns arise from this metaphysical footing. This thesis then considers how possibility is integral to human selfhood. Genuine selfhood is an openness towards God's eternal possibility, rather than the self's attempting to create its own eternal possibilities via some other means of actualization.

If the human person, by faith, becomes 'grounded in the absolute', then that person is becoming a self precisely because God is actualizing her possibilities. God is for Kierkegaard the source of all possibility. Theologically, Kierkegaard's conception of possibility presents us with ideas that may be fruitful in further discussion of God's attributes and the ways in which God is understood to relate to the created world. Anthropology, ontology, and theology are thus inextricably linked.

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Abstract (long)

This thesis analyzes the writings of Søren Kierkegaard in a novel way and suggests that Kierkegaard's thought—in particular, his theological anthropology—is undergirded by an inchoate metaphysics of modality. It focuses on the concept of possibility (Danish: *Mulighed*), arguing that possibility is a primary ingredient of the Kierkegaardian self and serves as a kind of 'engine' for the development of the individual before God. Accordingly, viewing Kierkegaard's works through the lens of possibility is a fruitful way to gain new insights into his beliefs, and clarifies what he sought to express in his authorship. Presently, it appears that no full-length research project has been specifically devoted to examining the development and implementation of the concept of possibility in Kierkegaard's work, and the primary purpose of this thesis is to rectify that situation.

Kierkegaard, I suggest, formulates a multilayered account of possibility that, while not abandoning metaphysics, re-frames possibility existentially, in terms of what the self may actually become, not only in and for itself but also in relation to God. While it is true that possibility is often associated, particularly in the pseudonymous writings, with the frivolous abstraction of speculative (Hegelian) thought, this does not mean that Kierkegaard found the concept distasteful or unhelpful. In fact, possibility is also a basic ontological category through which Kierkegaard develops many of his important philosophical and theological articulations. Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms regularly suggest that possibility is an indispensable concept, both anthropologically and metaphysically. Moreover, within both the pseudonymous and

eponymous writings, possibility is not only given a privileged position but becomes a primary catalyst in Kierkegaard's vision of self-becoming.

It is generally agreed that Kierkegaard is committed to some kind of theological anthropology, in the sense that the task of human self-becoming and faith in God are closely connected. Kierkegaard's metaphysics of possibility motivates, and figures prominently in, this commitment. Possibility is both foundational and a key constituent of the Kierkegaardian self. This is not to say that Kierkegaard's other significant anthropological concepts—synthesis, freedom, temporality, eternity, etc.—lose their importance, but rather that all of these ultimately serve the purpose of actualizing the possibilities of the individual. Neither is possibility *per se* the goal of the self. Rather, possibility is the category by which the self's freedom maintains the syntheses through which it is established. In this sense, the self is possibility.

As stated above, Kierkegaard's primary concern is with the existential possibilities that, in his view, ought to be actualized in the life of the individual. For these possibilities there is always a correlated responsible action. In this way, possibility has to do with lived activity, with ethics, with religious faith. Said differently, for Kierkegaard, one's selfhood and one's relation to God both require an ontology of possibility. His existential concerns arise from this metaphysical footing. Ontologically, possibility is prior to both human experience and human reason, though it can only be interpreted from within a lived context that includes both. Accordingly, before delving into Kierkegaard's account of existential possibility, it is important to consider the ways in which his conception of metaphysics prepares the ground for that existential project.

This thesis considers, then, how possibility is integral to human selfhood. In setting the stage for these discussions, the first chapter argues that possibility is a foundational term within Kierkegaard's ontology. Possibility is for him an indispensable mode of being. After analyzing

the Aristotelian and Hegelian frameworks that Kierkegaard inherited, the metaphysical components of his conception of possibility are established. It is argued that the development of possibility, actuality, and necessity in Kierkegaard's thought is remarkably consonant with contemporary modal accounts—in particular, something akin to Alvin Plantinga's 'actualism'. Chapter one also examines the relationship between essence and existence in Kierkegaard's philosophy, and describes Kierkegaard's rejection of Hegelian necessity.

In chapter two, Kierkegaard's concept of possibility is shown to be directly tied to his concept of freedom. Indeed, possibility and freedom are inextricably linked for Kierkegaard, so much so that one cannot fully appreciate what he means by possibility without understanding its relation to freedom. Five aspects of freedom are outlined—freedom's concretion, freedom's relation to selfhood, freedom's repetition, freedom's anxiety, and freedom's being grounded in God—that are consonant with his metaphysics of possibility. The two terms are further explicated in a manner that both strengthens the bond between them and highlights the important differences that allow for that bond to be maintained.

In chapter three, the character of God articulated by Kierkegaard is explored. It quickly becomes clear that both freedom and possibility depend on a specific conception of God as both the source and essence of possibility. In addition to delineating the ways in which Kierkegaard's conception of God is intimately tied to possibility, I also consider what it might mean for human beings to relate to a divinity fundamentally conceived of in terms of possibility, and whether such a conception is consistent with Kierkegaard's own account of Christian faith (as well as Christian theology in general). This fundamentally has to do with the individual being grounded in a God who is 'that all things are possible.'

In chapter four, the contours of the Kierkegaardian self are outlined, particularly as they

relate to his metaphysics of possibility. Ideally, abstract (or conceptual) possibility and existential possibility are united in the conscious self. But in actuality, this unity always already escapes us: as the self begins to consider its abstract possibilities, the result is that the reflective self, in its spatial-temporal existence, unleashes more and more abstract possibilities, overwhelming itself existentially and tripping itself up in the ‘dizziness’ of freedom. The freedom of the self is, of course, directly related to its possibilities. No matter how much the self accomplishes, it never achieves true or concrete unity of self, because all of its possibilities remain disconnected by the unbridgeable gap between the temporal and the eternal. That is, we can never say, at any time, just what we will become as ‘selves.’ This incompleteness of selfhood is highlighted in the self’s journey of becoming, and in the requirement that the self is grounded in something other than itself.

Finally, in chapter five, possibility’s stimulation of selfhood is mapped across Kierkegaard’s three ‘stages’ of existence (aesthetic, ethical, religious). This development is reflected in both Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous and eponymous writings. Moving from the early works to the later ‘Christian’ writings, a particular theme consistently appears, underpinning Kierkegaard’s thought: the self ‘is’ what it is by virtue of its relation to possibility. In the aesthetic stage, the self has not yet taken responsibility for its selfhood; it remains disinterested in that which is not immediate (abstract possibility). In Kierkegaard’s ethical sphere, the self admits it must take responsibility for itself and must relate itself to the world (instead of relating only to the immediate). Here, a self recognizes that if it thinks about an actuality, it is in fact thinking about a possibility, since it is asking about something about which it must decide to actualize. There is action involved in the ethical.

Only by lived activity can we distinguish our possibilities from our actualities. But the

self's possibilities are also found to be the catalyst for the inexplicable leap into what Kierkegaard calls sin. And in order for the self to properly actualize its possibilities, it must gain the knowledge necessary to form a correct perspective of itself. This is only possible if the self is also made aware of its present sinful state—that it is unable to effectively actualize its possibilities where it really counts (in matters of the eternal). On Kierkegaard's view, this proves to be impossible for the ethical self, since every attempt to control the actualization of the possible leads to the opening up of more possibilities, rather than simply providing a system by which possibilities can be resolved. Once the self has this knowledge, it is cognizant of its inability to reach the possibility it seeks on its own.

Repentance is the self's admission of its inability to independently realize its possibilities, and the surrender of its desperate attempt to hold onto its self-relation. In repentance, the self recognizes that God is its only source of possibility. And this recognition, a result of the condition of faith (given by God), culminates in a new paradigm of possibility, 'that all things are possible.' The genuine self is thus a religious self, committed to God. I finally propose that, given the limitations of both the aesthetic and ethical spheres, the only possibility for the self to be both free and genuine rests in God's providing the content for that possibility, and grounding oneself in this absolute possibility is only established through an act of faith, since it is the self's reliance on a possibility that resists all limitation. The religious self admits that it is incapable of systematizing its own possibilities. This leads to both the closing of and the re-opening of possibility as the self admits its need for God.

The self's imitation of Christ is therefore not undertaken as a revived independence, wherein the self regains the power to actualize its possibilities, but for Kierkegaard stems from the recognition that God-in-Christ—as the ground that establishes the self—is the source of all

possibility, and the self does not independently enact its own possibilities, but relies upon God for self-actualization. Genuine selfhood is an openness towards God's eternal possibility, rather than the self's attempting to create its own eternal possibilities via some other means of actualization. If the human person, by faith, becomes grounded in the absolute which sustains it, then that person is becoming a self precisely because God is actualizing her possibilities. Thus, the self is fundamentally theological. God is for Kierkegaard the source of all possibility. Anthropology, ontology, and theology are inextricably linked.

Theologically, then, Kierkegaard's conception of possibility presents us with ideas that may be fruitful in discussing God's attributes and the ways in which God is understood to relate to the created world. His depiction of God in terms of possibility points not only to the limitations of traditional metaphysical language when describing God but also the vastness that our conceptions of God may be allowed. Philosophically, viewing Kierkegaard's thought through the lens of modal possibility provides further links between his work and contemporary analytic philosophy, thereby adding to the important and ever-growing body of scholarship that seeks to dialogue across the apparent boundaries between analytic and continental philosophy.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	p. iv
List of Abbreviations	p. vi
Introduction	p. 1
A Note on Methodology	p. 6
The Role of the Pseudonyms	p. 7
A Brief Literature Review	p. 12
Defining Possibility	p. 15
Chapter Outline	p. 21
Chapter One: Kierkegaard's Metaphysical Framework	p. 26
Introducing Kierkegaard's Metaphysics of Modality	p. 27
Philosophical Influences: Aristotle	p. 28
Aristotle on Change, Potentiality, and 'Being-at-Work'	p. 31
Kierkegaard's Appropriation of Aristotle	p. 37
Philosophical Influences: Hegel	p. 41
A Hegelian Metaphysics of Modality	p. 45
Johannes Climacus as a Guide	p. 52
Two Modes of Being: Possibility and Actuality	p. 54
Essence and Existence	p. 65
Possibility, Actuality, and Necessity	p. 73
Summary	p. 78
Chapter Two: Possibility and Freedom	p. 79
Introduction	p. 80

Kierkegaard's Multifaceted View of Freedom	p. 80
Abstract and Concrete Freedom	p. 83
Freedom and Selfhood	p. 88
Freedom, Possibility, and Repetition	p. 96
Freedom, Possibility, and Anxiety	p. 106
Freedom is Grounded in God	p. 114
Interpreting the Relation between Freedom and Possibility	p. 119
Summary	p. 124
Chapter Three: Possibility and God	p. 125
Introduction	p. 126
God is 'That All Things are Possible'	p. 127
The Hegelian Account of Divine Possibility	p. 130
The 'Infinite Qualitative Difference'	p. 135
God as Possibility in <i>The Sickness Unto Death</i>	p. 139
God as the 'Eternal One'	p. 143
God as Absolute Freedom	p. 151
Eternality and Necessary Freedom	p. 160
Conceiving of God in Terms of Responsibility	p. 162
Summary	p. 165
Chapter Four: The Kierkegaardian Self	p. 167
Introduction	p. 168
A Brief Definition of Selfhood	p. 169
Self as Synthesis	p. 171

Self and Spirit	p. 178
Self as Freedom	p. 185
Possibility, Freedom, and Despair	p. 187
Davenport and Rudd on the Self	p. 196
The ‘Grounding’ of Selfhood	p. 204
Selfhood as Becoming	p. 209
Summary	p. 214
Chapter Five: Possibility and Selfhood	p. 216
Introduction	p. 217
Possibility in the Aesthetic Sphere	p. 217
From Despair to Decision: Possibility in the Ethical Sphere	p. 226
Responding to an Initial Criticism	p. 236
Against the Argument for Ethical Sufficiency	p. 242
Sin as Lost Possibility	p. 253
Possibility and Responsibility	p. 261
Possibility in the Religious Sphere	p. 264
The Double-Movement of the Self Before God	p. 268
Summary	p. 272
Conclusion: To Will One Possibility	p. 274
Purity of Heart is to ‘Will One Possibility’	p. 275
Bibliography	p. 280

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List of Abbreviations of Kierkegaard's Writings

CA: The Concept of Anxiety, Kierkegaard's Writings VIII (Reidar Thomte, Translator and Editor). Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.

CD: Christian Discourses, Kierkegaard's Writings XVII (Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Translators and Editors). Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.

CUP: Concluding Unscientific Postscript Volumes 1 and 2, Kierkegaard's Writings XII (Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Translators and Editors). Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.

EO 1: Either/Or Volume 1, Kierkegaard's Writings III (Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Translators and Editors). Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987.

EO 2: Either/Or Volume 2, Kierkegaard's Writings IV (Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Translators and Editors). Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987.

EUD: Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses, Kierkegaard's Writings V (Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Translators and Editors). Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.

FT: Fear and Trembling, Kierkegaard's Writings VI (Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Translators and Editors). Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.

JC: Johannes Climacus, Kierkegaard's Writings VII (Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Translators and Editors). Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985.

JP: Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers, 2nd Edition, 7 Volumes (Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Translators and Editors). Bloomington, IL: Indiana University Press, 1967-1978. 2nd Edition, 1999.

Pap: Papirer Vols I-XI 3 (P.A. Heiberg, V. Kuhr and E. Torsting, Editors). København: Gyldendal, 1909-1948.

PC: Practice in Christianity, Kierkegaard's Writings XX (Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Translators and Editors). Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.

PF: Philosophical Fragments, Kierkegaard's Writings VII (Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Translators and Editors). Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985.

PV: The Point of View, Kierkegaard's Writings XXII (Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Translators and Editors). Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.

R: Repetition, Kierkegaard's Writings VI (Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Translators and Editors). Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.

SKS: Søren Kierkegaard's Skrifter, Electronic version 1.8.1 (Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Joakim Garff, Johnny Kondrup, Karsten Kynde, Tonny Aagaard Olesen, and Steen Tullberg, Editors). København: Søren Kierkegaard Forskningscenteret, 2014, www.sks.dk.

SLW: Stages on Life's Way, Stages on Life's Way, Kierkegaard's Writings XXI (Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Translators and Editors). Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988.

SD: The Sickness Unto Death (Alastair Hannay, Translator and Editor). London/New York: Penguin Books, 1989.

SUD: The Sickness Unto Death, Kierkegaard's Writings XIX (Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Translators and Editors). Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.

UDVS: Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits, Kierkegaard's Writings XV (Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Translators and Editors). Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

WA: Without Authority, Kierkegaard Writings XVIII (Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Translators and Editors). Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.

WL: Works of Love, Kierkegaard's Writings XVI (Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Translators and Editors). Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.

Introduction

Introduction

This thesis analyzes the concept of ‘possibility’ (*Mulighed*) in the thought and writings of Søren Kierkegaard, arguing that, among other things, possibility is a primary ingredient of the Kierkegaardian self and, as such, it serves as a kind of existential ‘engine’ for the development of the individual before God. I hope to show that viewing Kierkegaard’s work through the lens of possibility is a fruitful way to gain new insights into his thought, and clarifies what he sought to accomplish in his authorship. Presently, it appears that no full-length research project has been specifically devoted to examining the development and implementation of the idea of possibility in Kierkegaard’s work, and the primary purpose of my thesis is to rectify this situation.

This is not to say that there has been no academic discussion of Kierkegaard’s views on possibility; in fact, the importance of possibility for Kierkegaard has been recognized and discussed by many scholars. For example, John Elrod states, “The category of possibility is one of the most important in Kierkegaard’s ontology.”¹ Arnold Come points out that Kierkegaard spent far more time in his works “analysing the nature of possibility” than he did with actuality.² And Paul Sponheim, echoing Anti-Climacus, announces that “Possibility is the air which human striving needs if it is to survive.”³ Many analyses of Kierkegaard’s philosophy include the pseudonym Haufniensis’s pronouncement that “possibility is the weightiest of all categories.”⁴ Indeed, it would be difficult to describe Kierkegaard’s thinking without invoking possibility.

Nevertheless, few commentators have meticulously examined his use of the concept.

¹ John Elrod. “The Self in Kierkegaard’s Pseudonyms.” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 4, No. 4, 1973, p. 235.

² Arnold B. Come. *Kierkegaard as Humanist: Discovering My Self*. Montreal, QC/Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1995, p. 145.

³ Paul Sponheim. *Kierkegaard on Christ and Christian Coherence*. London: SCM Press, 1968, p. 130.

⁴ CA, p. 156/SKS 4, p. 455.

Perhaps this is due to the term's apparent sub-categorization within Kierkegaard's conceptual configuration. Possibility does not initially appear to have a place of prominence in Kierkegaard's three 'stages' of existence—the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. In Anti-Climacus's well-known definition of the self, possibility is not a constituent of any of the syntheses which are constitutive of genuine selfhood.⁵ (However, this quickly changes and possibility becomes one of the overarching themes of the entire book.) Moreover, possibility is often mentioned in relation to other concepts. For instance, in *The Sickness Unto Death*, we are told that possibility is related to freedom in this way: "freedom is the dialectical aspect of the categories of possibility and necessity."⁶ This configuration may lead some to relegate possibility to a secondary role.

Another reason why possibility may be regarded as secondary is that the term is often associated, particularly in the pseudonymous works, with the frivolousness of speculative thought, i.e., Hegelian abstraction. Johannes Climacus, for instance, asserts, "Abstraction is possibility... The actual subjectivity is not the knowing subjectivity."⁷ For Climacus, pure knowledge is "the medium of possibility," always abstract and having no connection to a person's actual existence. It is, he says, a "phantom."⁸ Thus, he appears to argue that possibility is opposed to authentic existence: "To conclude existence from thinking is, then, a contradiction, because thinking does just the opposite and takes existence away from the actual and thinks it by annulling it, by transposing it into possibility."⁹

But does this mean Kierkegaard found the concept of possibility distasteful or unhelpful?

⁵ *SUD*, p. 13/*SKS* 11, p. 129. The three syntheses mentioned are finite/infinite, temporal/eternal, and necessity/freedom. The relationship between freedom and possibility will be further delineated throughout this thesis.

⁶ *SUD*, p. 29/*SKS* 11, p. 145.

⁷ *CUP*, p. 316/*SKS* 7, p. 288.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *CUP*, p. 317/*SKS* 7, p. 289.

Not at all. In fact, though possibility (like nearly every Kierkegaardian concept) can be improperly applied in existence, the importance of possibility is seen in a close examination of the Kierkegaardian corpus, and, as I will show, possibility is a basic ontological category through which Kierkegaard is able to develop the core of his philosophical and theological articulations, including his views on the self and God. Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms also suggest that possibility is an indispensable concept. Anti-Climacus, for instance, asserts that “possibility is for the self what oxygen is for breathing.”¹⁰ I believe that within both the pseudonymous and eponymous works possibility is not only given a privileged position but also becomes a primary catalyst in Kierkegaard’s anthropological vision.

It is generally agreed that Kierkegaard is committed to some sort of theological anthropology, in the sense that human selfhood and God are closely connected. I submit that Kierkegaard’s metaphysics of possibility motivates, and figures prominently in, this commitment. Possibility is both foundational for existence and a key constituent of the Kierkegaardian self. It is a category of both being and living. This is not to say that other significant anthropological concepts—synthesis, freedom, temporality, eternity, etc.—lose their importance, but rather that all of these ultimately serve the purpose of actualizing the possibilities of the individual. Neither do I want to suggest that possibility *per se* is the goal of the self. Rather, possibility is the category by which the self’s freedom maintains the syntheses through which it is established.¹¹ In this sense, the self is possibility.¹²

We must always bear in mind that Kierkegaard’s primary concern had to do with the

¹⁰ *SUD*, p. 40/*SKS* 11, p. 155.

¹¹ Note: the self is *not* established *by* the syntheses.

¹² We might think of this in terms of story or narrative. Indeed, a number of scholars have pointed out the links between Kierkegaard and ‘narrative selfhood’. (See, for instance, the work of John Davenport and Patrick Stokes.) There are, within the self, possibilities waiting to be realized, much in the way that an author has access to many different plotlines that may be developed as the story is written. And, until the last words are finally written and the text is published, there is always the option of changing the story—of actualizing possibilities other than the ones currently envisioned.

existential possibilities which, in his view, ought to be actualized in each person's life.¹³ For these possibilities there is always a correlated responsibility. In this way, possibility has to do with lived activity, with ethics, with religious faith. As Alastair Hannay notes: "Kierkegaard's category of the possible is a capacious one, and includes the ethical realities of individuals other than oneself as conceived by oneself... The equation of understanding and possibility is not intended, as it were, to bestow on possibility the *benefit* of cognizability; rather it is to give the cognizable the unsettled status of 'mere' possibility."¹⁴ This very 'capaciousness', I suggest, includes a metaphysical component that propels possibility to unsettle our beliefs, and, indeed, unsettles our existence itself.

Said differently, for Kierkegaard, one's selfhood and one's relation to God both entail an ontology of possibility. His existential concerns arise from this metaphysical footing. Ontologically, possibility is prior to both human experience and human reason, though it can only be interpreted from within a lived context that includes both. Accordingly, before delving into Kierkegaard's account of existential possibility, it is important to consider the ways in which his conception of metaphysics prepares the ground for that existential project. I argue that Kierkegaard formulates a metaphysical account of possibility but moves beyond this to an existential account that, while not abandoning the metaphysical, re-frames possibility in terms of what the self may actually become, not only in and for itself but also in relation to God.

Theologically, Kierkegaard's conception of possibility presents us with ideas that may be fruitful in discussing God's attributes and the ways in which God is understood to relate to the created world. Kierkegaard is adamant that God is the apex of possibility—that, for God, 'all

¹³ *JP* 5100/*Pap* I A 75, August 1, 1835.

¹⁴ Alastair Hannay. *Kierkegaard*. London: Routledge, 1982, p. 154, emphasis in original.

things are possible' is more than a rhetorical statement.¹⁵ His depiction of God in terms of possibility points not only to the limitations of traditional metaphysical language when describing God but also the vastness that our conceptions of God may be allowed. And, philosophically, viewing Kierkegaard's thought through the lens of modal possibility provides further links between his work and contemporary analytic philosophy, thereby adding to the important and ever-growing body of scholarship that seeks to dialogue across the apparent boundaries between analytic and continental philosophy.

A Note on Methodology

At this point, one might ask whether my approach to Kierkegaard is not somewhat misguided; Kierkegaard as metaphysician, it could be argued, is surely an oxymoron. While I readily admit that there is a methodological concern here, I believe it ultimately to be a manageable one. Although Kierkegaard is not typically seen as a metaphysician—indeed, he usually is taken to be a thinker who opposes metaphysical systems¹⁶—this does not mean he lacked the rigor of thought required for well-developed arguments. Rather, he applied his attention toward a particular goal: the prompting of genuine existential growth in his readers. As mentioned above, Kierkegaard's primary sphere of concern—existential possibility—resides within (but is not reducible to) the broader domain of metaphysical possibility. His account of

¹⁵ See, for example, *SUD*, p. 38/*SKS* 11, p. 153, where Anti-Climacus states, "What is decisive is that with God everything is possible." We will consider later whether or not Kierkegaard believes there are logical limits to such a claim.

¹⁶ See, for example, *CA*, p. 49, 81/*SKS* 4, p. 354, 384-85; *CUP*, p. 118ff/*SKS* 7, p. 114ff; *SUD*, p. 99/*SKS* 11, p. 211. The most common conceptual foil against which Kierkegaard is drawn for such purposes is Hegel's 'system of logic'. While such a system may have value as a conceptual framework, it is meaningless as a "system of existence," which is to say that a logical system must never be confused with life as it actually lived. Perhaps it is different for God, but such is the case for every human being. (See *CUP*, p. 118/*SKS* 7, p. 114.)

possibility therefore finds its fulfilment in existential actions that are responses to crucial metaphysical claims (and their limitations). It is worthwhile, then, to explore the metaphysical assumptions that drive Kierkegaard's existential vision.

The Role of the Pseudonyms

Similarly, I must consider the role of the pseudonymous writings for interpretation of the Kierkegaardian corpus. The majority of Kierkegaard's deliberations on possibility are spoken through the mouths of pseudonyms, particularly Johannes Climacus and Anti-Climacus. This results in the nagging question: how many of the pseudonymous claims can be attributed to Kierkegaard as his own beliefs? No small amount of ink has been spilled over this issue; Kierkegaard does not make things easier by announcing in *The Point of View* that the pseudonymous writings are "in altogether different categories" from his own life.¹⁷ Mark C. Taylor rightly points out that Kierkegaard himself says of the pseudonyms that they are 'poetic'.¹⁸ Taylor further suggests that the pseudonyms retain a "function in Kierkegaard's aesthetic education."¹⁹ But he perhaps goes too far when he calls them "imaginative projections of fantastic, fictitious forms of life that can serve as models for the despairing person's self-interpretation and self-judgment."²⁰

This description gives the impression that the pseudonyms are nothing more than rhetorical exaggerations. It would seem better to say that the pseudonymous authors are representations of various forms of life that Kierkegaard supposes different persons actually

¹⁷ *PV*, p. 86/*SKS* 16, p. 64.

¹⁸ See *JP* 6786/*Pap* X 6 B 145, *n.d.*, 1851.

¹⁹ Mark C. Taylor. *Journeys to Selfhood: Hegel and Kierkegaard*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2000, p. 98.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

inhabit, perhaps because he also embodies each of them to some extent. It does not seem reasonable to assume that Kierkegaard has no association whatsoever with the views of the pseudonyms. To some extent, as their creator, Kierkegaard is present in all of them, even if indirectly and ‘without authority’. In his *Journals*, for example, Kierkegaard says of *The Sickness unto Death*, “it is plain to see that I personally am a part of the book.”²¹ Paul Holmer describes the situation well: “these subauthors are Kierkegaard’s creation and, almost like characters in a novel, are variously related to their author.”²² The pseudonyms, to some extent, represent the possibilities Kierkegaard actualized in the course of his own project of selfhood. A clue to this should be that many of the pseudonymous works feature themes pivotal to Kierkegaard’s own self-development (broken engagement, father-son relational tension, deep anxiety about the future, etc.).

This does not mean, however, that we can unearth the ‘real’ Kierkegaard via the pseudonyms. Kierkegaard states that it would “be going too far in transforming a fictitious character into actuality; a fictitious character has no possibility other than the one he has; he cannot declare that he could also speak in another way and yet be the same; he has no identity which encompasses many possibilities.”²³ Further, as Holmer reminds us, “to cite them as if they were of Kierkegaard’s point of view would mean that one could see in all of this what stage or form of life Kierkegaard himself occupied. But this is absurd, for the stages are multiple.”²⁴ That is to say, one does not simply remain static in a single stage; there is a never-ending dialectical movement between the various stages. Taylor likewise makes an excellent point when he

²¹ JP 6437/Pap X 1 A 525, n.d., 1849. Granted, Kierkegaard had planned to author *SUD* in his own name until just prior to publication, when he made the decision to publish it pseudonymously. Most scholars therefore conclude that it, in particular, is an expression of ideas that are reflective of Kierkegaard’s own views.

²² Paul L. Holmer. “Post-Kierkegaard: Remarks about Being a Person.” *Kierkegaard’s Truth: The Disclosure of the Self* (Smith, Joseph H., M.D., Editor). New Haven, CT/London: Yale University Press, 1981, p. 11.

²³ JP 6439/Pap X 1 A 530, n.d., 1849.

²⁴ Holmer, p. 11.

suggests that Kierkegaard's pseudonyms "force the reader to confront difficult choices posed by irreconcilable alternatives. The dramatis personae lay a claim upon the will as well as upon the imagination of the audience."²⁵ In this sense, they may articulate a reader's thoughts or feelings in words that the reader finds unable to express.

What, then, does this imply about the unity of the authorship? While George Pattison rightly notes that it is difficult to accurately determine the aims of a thinker "who operates simultaneously on so many different levels," this should not imply that there are no consistent themes in the authorship that provide the outlines for establishing some rough framework of ideas in which Kierkegaard resides.²⁶ Indeed, Pattison's insistence that, like the various artworks of a famous painter, there is a 'style' to Kierkegaard's work that enables us to recognize him in the various texts suggests that, in spite of the fact that no absolute consensus may ever be reached, there are legitimate claims that can be made about what a Kierkegaardian text contains and is committed to.²⁷ This would presumably include the metaphysical ideas to which Kierkegaard himself seems committed.

While I would not be so brash as to suggest that possibility is Kierkegaard's 'great idea', I agree with Merold Westphal that, in both the pseudonymous and eponymous writings, we find a cluster of ideas that are meant to point in a particular direction. The pseudonymous personae are able to "express their own views without getting into trouble with the censors," which entails putting forward a range of positions, some of which may be consonant with Kierkegaard's own beliefs, and others which are not.²⁸ Metaphorically, this exemplifies the Kierkegaardian

²⁵ Taylor, p. 100.

²⁶ George Pattison. *Kierkegaard's Upbuilding Discourses: Philosophy, Theology, Literature*. London: Routledge, 2002, p. 6.

²⁷ Pattison, *Kierkegaard's Upbuilding Discourses*, p. 6-7.

²⁸ Merold Westphal. *Becoming A Self: A Reading of Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1996, p. 8.

metaphysics that I am proposing; a plethora of possibilities are advanced and it is up to the individual to decide how they will appropriate those possibilities within their own existence.

In light of this, it seems viable to trace the maturing of certain themes in Kierkegaard's work by examining the divergent views represented by the pseudonyms and tracing the consonances within those views. These themes can then be compared with Kierkegaard's eponymous writings and his journals, in order to suggest a consistent presentation throughout Kierkegaard's authorship. However, I do admittedly give priority to certain texts over others. At the most rudimentary level, this reflects the use of the word *Mulighed* and its variants throughout Kierkegaard's corpus; those texts where he engages most extensively with the term clearly deserve more attention. For instance, although *Fear and Trembling* is perhaps Kierkegaard's best known work, possibility (as a concept) is mentioned only a few times in the text. Thus, it likely merits less attention overall than other writings, such as *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, that engage more extensively with the term.

On the other hand, we should not assume that quantity entails quality. Depth of engagement is also needed. But how does one appropriately judge depth of engagement with a concept? Might it not be the case that one paragraph carries with it more authorial weight than another of equal or greater acclaim? This becomes especially tricky, given Kierkegaard's authorial style. With this in mind, I have tried to employ a principle of selection that allows for both constancy and growth in Kierkegaard's thought. This involves trying to locate themes in his work that remain relatively stable conceptually and diachronically. At the same time, when variations exist between texts, I have tended to accept that the later writings generally represent more mature views, even if these views still need to be balanced against those found in earlier works.

For example, the writings of Anti-Climacus appear to offer a Christian corrective to Climacus's ethico-religious statements. The juxtaposition of the two pseudonyms suggests as much. Therefore, it seems reasonable to conclude that the views expressed in *PF* and *CUP* are not Kierkegaard's last word. However, given that the views expressed in *SUD*, at least, are meant to be understood as an unrealistic extreme, a Christian in an "extraordinarily high sense," it also seems reasonable to say that these are not the last word either.²⁹ But if we find themes that remain consistent from, say, Climacus to Anti-Climacus, and we find that corresponding views are also present in the journals, then I believe we have reason to think that we are closer to an accurate representation of Kierkegaard's own thoughts. Additionally, given the focus on theological anthropology in this dissertation, it is perhaps inevitable that I focus on Kierkegaard's more 'anthropological' works, primary among which are *CA* and *SUD*. This may reflect a bias, but I hope to show that it is not unreasonable.

As for the eponymous writings—the 'upbuilding discourses' and the like—again, I have tried to include relevant material wherever appropriate, but in many cases the term 'possibility' in these writings appears to be employed generally, rather than in an existential-metaphysical sense. Nevertheless, I have included key sections from *Works of Love* and some of the discourses (particularly "To Need God is a Human Being's Highest Perfection") to show the connections between Kierkegaard's metaphysics of possibility and the application of these ideas in his more 'practical' writings. All of these contribute to the overall picture I am trying to paint regarding Kierkegaard's underlying modal metaphysics. Thus, we discover, through a closer examination of the pseudonymous writings in conjunction with the eponymous writings and the journals, both the importance and the danger of possibility, as we become selves before God.

²⁹ *JP* 6433/*Pap* X 1 A 517, *n.d.*, 1849

A Brief Literature Review

I noted above that no full-length research project so far has focused specifically on Kierkegaard's metaphysics of possibility (though references to Kierkegaard's conception of possibility are abundant in various books and journal articles). There are, however, at least two in-depth textual examinations of Kierkegaardian possibility in the relevant literature; both reside within the context of broader analyses of Kierkegaard's philosophical significance. The authors of these analyses are George Stack and Arnold Come, and I now provide a brief account of their texts.

George Stack's 1977 book, *Kierkegaard's Existential Ethics*, features as its second chapter an extensive analysis of the concept of possibility in Kierkegaard's writings. Stack concludes that the "central category by which individual existence can be understood is that of possibility (*Mulighed*)."³⁰ Although Kierkegaard never explicitly says that the human being *is* its possibility, nevertheless, says Stack, Kierkegaard expresses consonance with the Heideggerian view that "the notions of man's fundamental potentialities—his being-possible, his projection of himself towards the realization of possibilities—are central to... human development."³¹

I will suggest, however, that there is an enormous, even qualitative, difference between the human being as one who 'is its possibility' and the human being as one who 'has possibilities'. This is a key difference between not only Heidegger and Kierkegaard, but also between Stack's reading of Kierkegaard and my own. For although I suggest that the self is indeed, in a very real sense, 'the possible self', I will argue that in the final analysis this selfhood cannot be fully actualized by the individual on his/her own. Without a 'ground' or 'absolute' in

³⁰ George Stack. *Kierkegaard's Existential Ethics*. University, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1977, p. 44.

³¹ *Ibid.*

which the self is established—a ground that is the source of its possibility—the self will never become itself in truth and completion.

Stack further states, “The problem of analyzing the ontology of possibility or the conditions for the possibility of possibilities is that we are inclined to think of possibilities as having a kind of independent being in a nebulous realm between being and nothingness. But this is a fruitless approach to the question because of the tendency to speak of possibles as if they were in fact actualities.”³² Stack argues that for Kierkegaard “the understanding of possibility is itself based upon imagination insofar as it... enables us to have consciousness of what is not. Ontologically, possibility seems to be founded upon the present actuality of entities capable of motion or transformation. Or, again, possibility may be conceived of in terms of the ambiguity, uncertainty, and amorphous character of the future.”³³ While I think this view has some merit, I will suggest that there is a metaphysical basis for Kierkegaardian possibility that Stack misses, and this metaphysics allows us to speak of Kierkegaard’s ontology of possibility in ways that Stack cannot.

Moreover, Stack explicitly connects possibility to the ethical sphere, and infers that the ethical ought to be the primary category by which we understand Kierkegaardian selfhood.³⁴ I argue instead that the ethical, although vital, cannot be the ultimate category for selfhood precisely because the ethical too falls into the dilemma created by possibility inasmuch as the self has an apparently endless task before itself to be ethical, and this is a task that the self cannot complete. Thus, the self either has to admit that it cannot really be ethical, or it must rely on another ground to provide the ethical stability needed for genuine selfhood. This is where the

³² Stack, p. 76.

³³ Stack, p. 75-76.

³⁴ Stack, p. x: “It is the *existential category* of possibility that is central to what I have called the ethical ‘turn’ or movement, a category that is intimately related to Kierkegaard’s understanding of the self and its becoming.”

religious category overtakes the ethical for Kierkegaard.

Arnold Come's 1995 book, *Kierkegaard as Humanist: Discovering My Self* (the first volume in a hefty two-volume set that also includes 1997's *Kierkegaard as Theologian: Recovering My Self*), focuses primarily on explicating Kierkegaardian freedom (five of the eight chapters—nearly 300 of its 475-plus pages—deal extensively with freedom). But both freedom and possibility play key roles in Come's book, and, as will become clear in chapter two, this is not an accident: possibility and freedom are so closely intertwined that Come sometimes infers that they are the same thing. I will suggest that this is a mistake; nevertheless, Come's analyses of these two concepts has proven extremely helpful for the development of my own views (Incidentally, his book is also the source of my title phrase, 'The Possible Self').

Come tends to color his statements with a great deal of rhetorical flourish, which is not necessarily a bad thing, but his tendency to perambulate in the text adds to the overall length of what is already a lengthy book. He is attempting nothing less than an in-depth analysis of Kierkegaard's anthropology, and in the process touches on a range of themes, including possibility. He helpfully describes the multilayered sense of the word in the pseudonymous writings, and points out that Kierkegaard is not always precise in his use of the term.³⁵ Indeed, his text is a valuable resource for anyone wanting to examine what Kierkegaard says about possibility. Accordingly, there will be some overlap between what I argue in this thesis and what Come contends in his tome. However, there are significant differences between Come and myself, not only in the way that I contour Kierkegaard's metaphysics of possibility, but also the way that my reading of Kierkegaard pushes against some of the assumptions Come makes in his

³⁵ Come notes that *Mulighed* can be translated as 'potentiality', "that is, something which already lodges in what is, with the ability to come into existence," or as 'possibility', "that is, something lying in an indeterminate future with a vague chance of coming into existence, contingent on several unpredictable circumstances." (Come, *Kierkegaard as Humanist*, p. 41.)

book.

These differences will become apparent in subsequent chapters; for now it is perhaps best to say that, whereas Come often develops his exegesis of Kierkegaardian texts in ways that tend to blend ideas together, I attempt to clarify and distinguish between concepts such as possibility and freedom, or possibility and necessity, in ways that Come seems either hesitant to do or is not primarily concerned with doing. Come's willingness to point out tensions and 'let them be' is important, but sometimes, in my view, it leads to a lack of clarity that could be resolved if more careful attention was given to the underlying assumptions that guide Kierkegaard's metaphysics. What appear to be logical incongruities or outright errors may, in fact, reflect *not* confusion on Kierkegaard's part but rather a depth of thinking that requires further digging. Nevertheless, I do not want to overreach, and I do accept much of what Come says. I will offer more deliberations on his work in later chapters.

Defining Possibility

Before going any further, I should define my key term. The word 'possibility' is usually thought of, in very basic terms, as something that may be the case.³⁶ It is meant to imply that if there is the slightest chance that something may happen, then it is possible. Or, to put it somewhat tautologically, if something is not impossible, it is possible. Typically, our day-to-day thoughts about possibility probably do not venture far beyond this brief definition. But, conceptually, many additional issues must be addressed if we hope to define possibility in a precise manner. These include questions regarding the type(s) of possibility (Is there only one type, or are there multiple types?), the nature or essential properties of possibilities (What

³⁶ The Oxford English Dictionary defines a possibility as 'a thing that may happen or may be the case'.

properly qualifies as a possibility, and what does not?), and what might be called the ‘ontology of possibility’, which involves also asking questions about free will (When is something possible, and when is something possible *for me*?). That is, if the world is deterministic, does this simply entail the negation of possibility?

Of course, the way in which one answers the latter questions depends, in part, on what types of possibility one accepts as conceptually coherent. Ian Hacking, in his essay “All Kinds of Possibility,” offers a wide-ranging list that reveals just how complicated establishing a definition of possibility may be. His inventory includes physical possibility, metaphysical possibility, logical possibility, epistemic possibility, economic possibility, human possibility, etc.³⁷ I assume with this last type, human possibility, he means something like existential possibility, which, as we shall see, is the primary—though not exclusive—type of possibility that concerns Kierkegaard. Hacking then proceeds to subsume these various types within two more general categories which he terms as: 1) possibilities of the type “It is possible that *p*,” and 2) possibilities of the type “It is possible for *A* to *x*.”³⁸

These two syntactical structures he takes to reference the difference between what might be called theoretical possibility, on the one hand, and actual possibility, on the other. As one might expect, he includes human possibility within the second category, alongside various types of possibility that fit the form Hacking proposes in his second category. Epistemic possibility he places in the first category, alongside various other types of theoretical possibility.³⁹ Leaving aside Hacking’s subsequent arguments for and against philosophical use of modalities, I simply note that we have, on this account, two general approaches to possibility—there are the types of possibility that fall under a ‘theoretical’ heading, and the types of possibility that fall under a

³⁷ Ian Hacking, “All Kinds of Possibility.” *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 84, No. 3, 1975, p. 321.

³⁸ Hacking, p. 322.

³⁹ Hacking, p. 325.

‘lived experience’ heading. This division, though still a sketch, is somewhat akin to the paradigm within which Kierkegaard developed his conception of possibility.

A somewhat different approach to possibility is pursued by contemporary analytic philosophers. Possibility, along with actuality and necessity, are understood as modal concepts. They describe the ways in which statements are true or false; for instance, when one says ‘it is possible that p ’ or ‘it is necessary that p ’. Generally speaking, we can say that, conceptually, possibility implies there is something that holds true in some possible world. Necessity, by contrast, implies a truth that holds in all possible worlds, i.e., it can never be false. Within the last few decades, perhaps beginning with Saul Kripke’s *Naming and Necessity*, there has been a rediscovery, so to speak, of Leibniz’s conceptions of necessity and possibility. Kripke and others began working with Leibnizian formulations of modality such that the language of ‘possible worlds’ is once again popular in Anglo-American philosophy. Michael Loux notes that analytic philosophers “came to believe that if we take seriously the framework of possible worlds and make it part of our overall ontological theory, we have the resources for dealing with a whole host of difficult philosophical problems.”⁴⁰

Philosophers who support the use of modal language in these ways will point out that we all have a pre-philosophical intuition that “things could have been otherwise” and we take these intuitions to have some truth value.⁴¹ That is, when we speak of the possibility that x or y might have been different, we really do believe that there is another way things *could have been*. A determinist may try to challenge this by arguing that there is only one given set of circumstances that must be the case, but this likewise includes a modal component; namely, necessity—there really *is* one necessary set of circumstances that has to be the case. Either way, modal principles

⁴⁰ Michael Loux. *Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction* (3rd Edition). New York/London: Routledge, 2006, p. 158.

⁴¹ Loux, p. 159.

are at work. The question then becomes, in what do these modalities consist? Are they merely semantic? Or do the terms actually describe features of the real world?

These questions have thus gained new currency within analytic philosophy; among continental philosophers there has perhaps been a more general acceptance of modal concepts as having a role to play within metaphysics. Hegel, for instance, had no problem speaking of possibility and actuality in terms of being and non-being, although just what he meant by those terms is still a source of much debate.⁴² In the following chapter I will argue that Kierkegaard's own view of possibility can be clarified through a comparison with contemporary analytic modal notions. But where does Kierkegaard fit into this picture? Does he belong here at all? Many commentators would no doubt question the wisdom of trying to apply any structured philosophical account to Kierkegaard's own methodology, let alone an analytic account of modality.

It would be an obvious anachronism to claim affinity between Kierkegaard and possible worlds in the contemporary analytic sense of the term. On the other hand, Kierkegaard was certainly familiar with Leibniz, and was exposed to the idea of possible worlds in its Leibnizian form.⁴³ Thus, it is not unreasonable to claim that Kierkegaard found value in approaching possibility from a Leibnizian angle. With this in mind, I suggest that Kierkegaard's understanding of possibility can be fruitfully engaged by using modal terminology. Brian Leftow, for instance, offers the following delineation of modal possibility. He begins with the category of the "nomically possible" (what is possible given the actual laws of physics), which he correlates with the "physically possible" (what is possible given the actual features of our universe). These two types he distinguishes from the "epistemically possible," which is what is possible within the

⁴² See chapter one for more on Hegel's view of modalities.

⁴³ See, for instance, *PF*, p. 80/*SKS* 4, p. 279.

confines of our knowledge. These three senses of possibility he terms ‘relative’, since they all remain bounded by certain limits—either the limits of our knowledge or the laws of physics. Relative possibility is contrasted with ‘absolute’ possibility, or what is possible *tout court*.⁴⁴

In other words, for an absolute possibility there are no conditions by which the possibility must be limited in order to be possible, which is to say that they are possible no matter what laws hold or what universe they might inhabit.⁴⁵ For instance, it is absolutely possible that in any world where there may be such things as triangles, the three angles of the triangle in an uncurved plane will add up to 180 degrees. This is necessarily the case in all possible worlds. The same would apply to an absolute *impossibility*. Leftow offers as an example the fact that nothing can be both red and green all over at the same time. This seems *prima facie* to be necessarily true. Thus, a thing that is red and green all over at the same time is absolutely impossible. So, Leftow distinguishes between what he calls ‘absolute modalities’, which are absolutely possible, absolutely impossible, absolutely necessary, etc., and the aforementioned relative modalities.⁴⁶

Modifying Leftow’s framework somewhat, I refer to the following: physical possibility, epistemic possibility, and existential possibility (all of which are forms of relative possibility) and absolute possibility. All of these I place under the umbrella of ‘metaphysical possibility’. That is, metaphysical possibility includes both relative and absolute possibilities, and one key issue will be deciding what kinds of possibility are considered legitimate. The reason for this terminological modification will become clear in the next chapter, where I argue that ‘absolute’ possibility infers something rather unusual for Kierkegaard. At any rate, when determining what is possible, we must take into account the possibilities that exist in our actual world, the possibilities that are independent of the world, and the possibilities we can personally actualize

⁴⁴ Brian Leftow. *God and Necessity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 30ff.

⁴⁵ Leftow, p. 34.

⁴⁶ Leftow, p. 37ff.

in our own lives. Additionally, there are the possibilities which are simply true by virtue of their necessity.

For example, if I say ‘it is possible that I could fly to London’, I am referring to a possibility that may be easily actualized due to modern technology, given that I have the money for the airfare. On the other hand, if I say ‘it is possible that I could travel through time’, I refer to a possibility that may exist, given the proposed laws of quantum physics, but it is not actualizable by anyone in the world (as far as we know). Alternatively, if I say ‘it is possible that I will enjoy my dinner tonight’, I refer to a matter about which I have insufficient knowledge, such that there exist multiple possibilities of which I may become aware, as I experience them (or not). In contrast to all these, if I say ‘it is possible that I will become a Buddhist’, I refer to a possibility with physical and epistemic components, but one that also involves a decision and action on my part. This is an existential possibility: the possibility that I will decide to modify my religious beliefs, or that I will not.⁴⁷

Kierkegaard’s primary concern is with existential possibility. However, since all existential possibilities are a subset of metaphysical possibility, a question that must be addressed; namely, what is the subset of metaphysical possibilities that are also existential possibilities? Or, said differently, what counts as an existential possibility? It is here, I think, that Kierkegaard’s account of possibility has potentially profound implications for theological speculation about God and humanity. For, if existential possibilities are in some way also metaphysical possibilities, then it is worth considering just how existential action is active in our metaphysics. Is there a sense in which existence impacts metaphysics? Do human actions play a

⁴⁷ I set aside most issues surrounding modality in contemporary analytic philosophy—questions as to which conception of modality (if any) is most coherent, or whether a cognitivist or non-cognitivist approach to modalities is to be preferred. For a valuable overview of current thought on modality in analytic philosophy, see *Modality: Metaphysics, Logic, and Epistemology* (Bob Hale and Aviv Hoffmann, Editors). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

role in determining reality? Do our actions influence or affect God in any way? In other words, possibility matters to both theological anthropology and the doctrine of God, which, in Christian theology, implies that it matters to all other doctrines as well, since one's beliefs about God and humanity will inevitably affect one's view of Christ, salvation, creation, the church, etc.

Utilizing the above framework enables us to see that we should not divorce the existential possibility with which Kierkegaard is primarily concerned from its physical and epistemic context. To do so not only ignores the way in which possibility is properly understood, but also, I suggest, prevents us from fully appropriating the existential possibilities to which Kierkegaard calls us to respond. John Elrod describes three achievements of Kierkegaardian possibility: it “saves the self from the suffocating grip of necessity,” possibility “corresponds precisely to the future,” and possibility is “a morally binding authority” for the self.⁴⁸ I prefer to say: possibility involves freedom, possibility involves the eternal, and possibility involves the ethical. The ‘heaviness’ of possibility resides in the fact that for Kierkegaard it is intimately tied to freedom, which makes it of the utmost importance for the self. Consequently, Kierkegaard does not only distinguish between theoretical and existential possibility, he also critiques theoretical possibility on the grounds that, to the extent it fails to relate to lived experience, it becomes a hindrance rather than a help to the individual's growth and self-actualization.

Chapter Outline

In the chapters that follow I will assess Kierkegaard's metaphysics of possibility. In particular, I will consider how possibility, for Kierkegaard, is integral to individual human selfhood. In setting the stage for these discussions, I argue in the first chapter that possibility is a

⁴⁸ Elrod, p. 235.

foundational term within Kierkegaard's ontology. Possibility is for him an indispensable mode of being. Through an examination of the Aristotelian and Hegelian metaphysical frameworks that Kierkegaard inherited, I outline the ways in which his understanding of possibility has both metaphysical and existential components. I then begin, through a careful analysis of Kierkegaard's writings, to show how the development of possibility, actuality, and necessity in Kierkegaard's thought is consonant with contemporary modal accounts—in particular, something like Plantinga's 'actualism'. I also examine the relationship between essence and existence in Kierkegaard's philosophy.

In chapter two, I explore how Kierkegaardian possibility relates to his conception of freedom. Indeed, possibility and freedom are inextricably linked for Kierkegaard, so much so that one cannot fully appreciate what he means by possibility without understanding its relation to freedom. I outline five aspects of freedom that are consonant with his metaphysics of possibility and attempt to clarify the two terms in a manner that both strengthens the bond between them and highlights the important differences that allow for that bond to be maintained. In chapter three, I explore the character of the God articulated by Kierkegaard, since it becomes clear that both freedom and possibility depend on a specific conception of God as the fount of possibility. I also consider what it might mean for human beings to relate to a divinity fundamentally conceived of in terms of possibility, and whether such a conception is consistent with Kierkegaard's own account of Christian faith (as well as Christian theology in general). This has to do with the self being grounded in a God who is 'that all things are possible.'

In chapter four, I consider the contours of the Kierkegaardian self and how this relates to his metaphysical assumptions. I first consider the self as synthesis. Ideally, abstract (or conceptual) possibility and existential possibility are united in the conscious self. But, as

Kierkegaard recognizes, in actuality, this unity always already escapes us: as the self begins to consider its abstract possibilities, the result is that the reflective self, in its spatial-temporal existence, unleashes more and more abstract possibilities, overwhelming itself existentially and tripping itself up in the ‘dizziness’ of freedom, which incidentally is the catalyst (but not the cause) of sin. The freedom of the self is, of course, directly related to its possibilities. No matter how much the self accomplishes, it never achieves true or concrete unity of self, because all of its possibilities remain disconnected by the unbridgeable gap between the temporal and the eternal. That is, we can never say, at any time, just what we will become as ‘selves.’ This incompleteness of self is highlighted in the requirement that the self is grounded in something other than itself, and in the self’s journey of becoming.

Finally, in chapter five, I look at the ways in which possibility motivates selfhood through the three ‘stages’ of existence. The movement of possibility can be mapped onto the Kierkegaardian stages of existence (aesthetic, ethical, religious) and is reflected in both Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous and eponymous writings. Moving from the early works to the later ‘Christian’ writings, we find that a particular theme consistently appears, underpinning Kierkegaard’s thought: the self ‘is’ what it is by virtue of its relation to possibility. In *Either/Or*, for instance, the aesthetic self simply refuses to decide or move toward actualizing any particular possibility. In the aesthetic stage, the self has not yet taken responsibility for its selfhood; it remains disinterested in that which is not immediate.

In Kierkegaard’s ethical sphere, the self admits it must take responsibility for itself and must relate itself to the world (instead of relating only to the immediate). Here, a self recognizes that if it thinks about an actuality, it is in fact thinking about a possibility, since it is asking about something about which it must decide. There is action involved in the ethical, whereas action is

not maintained in aesthetic selfhood. As Climacus explains in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, “[I]n asking ethically with regard to my own actuality, I am asking about its possibility, except that this possibility is not esthetically and intellectually disinterested but is a thought-actuality that is related to my own personal actuality—namely, that I am able to carry it out.”⁴⁹ This is why action becomes vital; only by lived decision can we distinguish our possibilities from our actualities.

But in *The Concept of Anxiety* the self’s possibilities are found to be the catalyst for the inexplicable leap into sin. And in *Philosophical Fragments*, we learn that in order for the self to properly actualize its possibilities, it must gain the knowledge necessary to form a correct perspective of itself. This is only possible if the self is made aware of its present sinful state—that it is unable to effectively actualize its possibilities where it really counts (in matters of the eternal). On Kierkegaard’s view, this proves to be impossible for the ethical self, since every attempt to control the actualization of the possible leads to the opening up of more possibilities, rather than simply providing a system by which possibilities can be resolved. Once the self has this knowledge, it is cognizant of its inability to reach the possibility it seeks on its own.

Repentance is the admission of the self’s inability to independently realize its possibilities, and the surrender of the self’s desperate attempt to hold onto its self-relation. In repentance, the self is placed in a position where it can recognize that God is the self’s ultimate source of possibility. And this recognition, a result of the condition of faith (given by God), culminates in a new paradigm of possibility, ‘that all things are possible.’ The genuine self is thus a religious self, committed to God. I finally propose that, given the limitations of both the aesthetic and ethical spheres, the only possibility for the self to be both eternal and free rests in God’s providing the content for that possibility, and grounding oneself in this absolute possibility

⁴⁹ *CUP*, p. 322-23/*SKS* 7, p. 294.

is only established through an act of faith, since it is the self's reliance on a possibility that resists all limitation. The religious self admits that it is incapable of systematizing its own possibilities. This leads to a need for repentance, which becomes both the closing of and the re-opening of possibility as the self admits its need for God.

The self's imitation of Christ is not undertaken as a revived independence, wherein the self regains the power to actualize its possibilities, but stems from the recognition that God-in-Christ—as the ground that establishes the self—is the source of all possibility, and the self does not independently enact its own possibilities, but relies upon God for self-actualization. Genuine selfhood is an openness towards God's eternal possibility, rather than the self's attempting to create its own eternal possibilities via some other means of actualization. Thus, the self is fundamentally theological. God is for Kierkegaard the source of all possibility. Anthropology, ontology, and theology are inextricably linked.

If the human person, by faith, becomes grounded in the absolute which sustains it, then that person is becoming a self precisely because God is actualizing her possibilities. God is necessary for the self's becoming. God-in-Christ, as the absolute paradox, is, strictly speaking, the impossible, at least when it comes to rational knowledge or empirical data. But we are paradoxically to view the impossible as a possibility. The self's anxiety stems from the tension found in attempting to relinquish all other possibilities for the sake of God. The 'purity of heart' that wills only God is, in fact, the willing of one possibility, which is that all things are possible. Let us turn, then, to Kierkegaard's metaphysics of possibility.

Chapter One: Kierkegaard's Metaphysical Framework

Introducing Kierkegaard's Metaphysics of Possibility

In this opening chapter I explore the extent to which Kierkegaard's writings contain a rich (though largely inchoate) metaphysics of possibility. My primary task is to make this latent metaphysics more explicit. Toward this end, I contemplate and evaluate Kierkegaard's use of several key terms, including possibility, actuality, necessity, essence, and existence. In subsequent chapters I will look at the relation between possibility and freedom, and consider how Kierkegaard's understanding of God directs that relation. I will then unite these analyses with Kierkegaard's conception of selfhood, and suggest that the self depends on the metaphysics of possibility that I have outlined. In my closing chapter I will examine the existential implications of this view of the 'possible self'.

It is notable that Kierkegaard's conception of possibility exhibits (at least) the following three characteristics: it maintains a distinction between 'actual' and 'non-actual' possibilities, it views non-actual possibilities—best understood as those possibilities that have not yet been actualized—as 'existing' in some sense, and it affirms the ability of the human person to freely and imaginatively actualize at least some of these non-actual possibilities. The importance of this third characteristic will become evident as I consider Kierkegaard's understanding of the self. The crucial difference between possibility and actuality is that while *metaphysically* possibility is 'higher' than actuality due to its universality and rational expression, *existentially* actuality is 'higher' than possibility due to its transformative function in the life of the person. Kierkegaard claims that this ability to actualize possibilities is catalyzed in and by a kind of freedom fundamental to human selfhood.

He will eventually posit, however, that this very capacity to actualize existential

possibility renders genuine selfhood impossible, as the self is ultimately caught in a double-bind: it cannot complete its task (actualizing all of one's possibilities is impossible for a finite being), but neither can it abandon its task, if it is to become a genuine self. Thus, the self is either reduced to incompleteness or must be 'completed' by another. For Kierkegaard, the completion of the self can only take place if the self is properly related to God, such that God provides the ground for the self's possibilities. I will address these issues in later chapters; for now, the point is to demonstrate how Kierkegaard develops and employs the idea of possibility in his metaphysics.

Philosophical Influences: Aristotle

Before turning to Kierkegaard, however, I consider the background in which his ideas were shaped. No concept is formed in a vacuum, and Kierkegaard's understanding of ontological modalities was motivated by several key figures. Certainly he was influenced by his teachers; in particular, P. M. Møller and F. C. Sibbern.⁵⁰ From the standpoint of the history of philosophy, however, Kierkegaard's account of possibility draws from two primary wells of inspiration: Aristotle and G. W. F. Hegel. I begin with Aristotle. It is important to note that, although Aristotle's metaphysical speculations inform his thought, Kierkegaard is not operating as an Aristotelian metaphysician; he is interested in the 'selfhood' of selves, not the 'thinghood' of things. This profoundly impacts his reading of Aristotle. Accordingly, Kierkegaard's interpretation and employment of Aristotelian terminology is somewhat unorthodox.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Poul Møller and Frederik Sibbern were two of Kierkegaard's professors at the University of Copenhagen and examiners for his dissertation, *On the Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*.

⁵¹ See, for example, Håvard Løkke and Arild Waaler. "Physics and Metaphysics: Change, Modal Categories, and Agency." *Kierkegaard and the Greek World. Tome II: Aristotle and other Greek Authors* (Jon Stewart, Editor).

Nevertheless, Kierkegaard's conception of possibility builds on Aristotle's ideas, even as it modifies and critiques them.

Kierkegaard apparently discovered the Aristotelian constructs of potentiality and movement via secondary sources; for instance, while reading Trendelenburg's *Logical Investigations*. There, he found a conception of modality that was consonant with his own views. As he says in a journal entry from 1845: "Very likely what our age needs most to illuminate the relationship between logic and ontology is an examination of the concepts: possibility, actuality, and necessity... Good comments are to be found in Trendelenburg's *Logische Untersuchungen*."⁵² In another entry Kierkegaard announces his debt more emphatically: "What I have profited from Trendelenburg is unbelievable; now I have the apparatus for what I had thought out years before."⁵³ According to George Pattison, the influence of Trendelenburg accounts heavily for Kierkegaard's commitment to "the world of becoming," which is "the 'unclarifiable background' of thinking, and, therefore, of any concept of Being" in Kierkegaardian thought.⁵⁴ It is generally understood to be the case that such a concept of being is heavily Aristotelian.⁵⁵

Recently, however, there has been some debate over just how much influence Trendelenburg had on Kierkegaard's conception of modal terms. Darío González argues that, although Kierkegaard does begin to refer to Trendelenburg's account of 'movement' or 'kinesis' around 1844, it seems that "the notion of 'movement' was already the guiding motif in his

Farnham, Surrey/Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2010, p. 25ff. They persuasively argue that Kierkegaard was neither a deep reader of Aristotle nor of the available secondary literature, relying instead on Møller and Sibbern, and Tennemann's *History of Philosophy*, for much of his understanding of Aristotle.

⁵² *JP* 199/Pap VI B 54:21, *n.d.*, 1845.

⁵³ *JP* 5977/Pap VIII 2 C 1, February, 1847.

⁵⁴ Pattison. *The Philosophy of Kierkegaard*, p. 18.

⁵⁵ George Stack concludes that "Trendelenburg emphasized the concept of motion or kinesis in his Aristotelian studies in direct opposition to the Hegelian dialectical principle and, in addition, he stressed the importance of purposive activity in terms of the Aristotelian teleology." (George Stack. *Kierkegaard's Existential Ethics*. University, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1977, p. 46.)

general approach to Greek texts.”⁵⁶ According to González, Trendelenburg’s importance for Kierkegaard stems from the former’s stress upon the ‘modal’ categories in philosophy. Kierkegaard’s subsequent idiosyncratic interpretation of Aristotle may thus have been influenced by Trendelenburg’s own rather creative appropriation.⁵⁷ Moreover, Løkke and Waaler suggest that Tennemann’s *The History of Philosophy* inspired the finer points of Kierkegaard’s own theorizing about change, possibility, and actuality.⁵⁸

I agree with González that “the reading of Aristotle’s texts *through* Trendelenburg’s presentation and interpretation plays a decisive and complex role” in Kierkegaard’s critique of Hegelian speculation.⁵⁹ One might think that Kierkegaard would apply Trendelenburg’s conception of modality—the view that movement is essential for modal categories—to his own views on possibility, but his focus seems to reside with applying Trendelenburg’s thought for the purposes of critiquing Hegelian logic for its apparent lack of movement due to “the impossibility of the self-productive movement of thought.”⁶⁰ When it comes to conceiving of possibility, the characterization of Aristotle found in Kierkegaard’s works appears to be of a variety more closely influenced by Møller’s teaching.⁶¹ I now examine Kierkegaard’s reading of Aristotle in more detail.

⁵⁶ Darío González. “Trendelenburg: An Ally Against Speculation.” *Kierkegaard and His German Contemporaries. Tome 1: Philosophy* (Jon Stewart, Editor). Farnham, Surrey/Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2007, p. 313.

⁵⁷ González, p. 323. In the end, however, Kierkegaard moves away from Trendelenburg, concluding that the latter was not at all “aware of the leap.” (*JP* 2341/*Pap* V A 74, *n.d.*, 1844.)

⁵⁸ Løkke and Waaler, p. 26.

⁵⁹ González, p. 314, emphasis in original.

⁶⁰ González, p. 327. Arnold Come suggests that Kierkegaard was likely drawn to “Trendelenburg’s distinction between ‘the actuality of the possible’ and ‘the possibility of the actual’ . The former has to do with ‘*what* is possible’, the latter with ‘*how* something is possible’ . . . the latter he calls ‘the inner possibility’, which is precisely what Kierkegaard struggles to analyse and clarify.” (Come, *Kierkegaard as Humanist*, p. 143, emphasis in original.) However, Come thinks that Kierkegaard “must have been greatly dissatisfied” with the fact that Trendelenburg argues for a modified Aristotelianism in which the final cause (God) determines the efficient cause of freedom (the human will). (Come, p. 144.)

⁶¹ Løkke and Waaler, p. 26.

Aristotle on Change, Potentiality, and ‘Being-at-Work’

In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Climacus announces: “The transition from possibility to actuality is, as Aristotle rightly teaches, κίνησις, a movement.”⁶² In line with his Danish and German philosophical forebears, Kierkegaard associated actuality and possibility with the Aristotelian terms *energeia* and *dunamis*, respectively.⁶³ But ‘actuality’, as Pattison explains, “does not simply apply to a world of facts, or objects that may or may not exist... ‘actuality’ points to a mode of being or existing.”⁶⁴ So, for example, I may have the potential to become an expert pianist, but whether I actualize that potential or not is another matter. Likewise, Kierkegaard sees existential possibility primarily in terms of what/whom an individual may become and actuality in terms of what/whom that individual is. Kierkegaard prioritizes the existential development catalyzed through recognition of possibilities. What matters is not the theoretical ‘act’ but the lived ‘action’.⁶⁵

Likewise, Aristotle’s ‘potentiality’ does not necessarily imply the kind of possibility with which Kierkegaard is concerned. For Aristotle, potentiality is a thing’s inherent capacity for change. This differs from a change of features, which is an outward manifestation of this capacity. Delineating the precise difference between a change of features and the actualization of

⁶² *CUP*, p. 342/*SKS* 7, p. 313.

⁶³ Pattison, *The Philosophy of Kierkegaard*, p. 40. These terms are often misunderstood; in fact, there is much debate over exactly what Aristotle meant by *dunamis* and *energeia*. Usually they are translated as ‘potentiality’ and ‘actuality’. However, both Joe Sachs and Stephen Makin argue that the terms are far more complex than what is merely conveyed by these English words. See Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* (Joe Sachs, Translator). Santa Fe, NM: Green Lion Press, 2002, p. xxxix-xl, and Aristotle’s *Metaphysics Book Theta* with Commentary (Stephen Makin, Translator). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. xxii-xxx. Kierkegaard admits these complexities, noting in his journals (and echoing Tennemann) that “κίνησις is difficult to define, because it belongs neither to possibility nor to actuality, is more than possibility and less than actuality.” (*JP* 258/*Pap* IV C 47, *n.d.*, 1842-43.)

⁶⁴ Pattison, p. 40.

⁶⁵ Some argue that actuality is determined and that modalities merely describe what has happened, and is happening, to us. But Climacus asserts something more—as we act in the world, *we* shape what will happen to us. We actualize future possibilities. In a sense, we are creating our futures, not by actually bringing the future into existence, but by establishing our relationship to that future, and thereby modifying, to some extent, our existence in that future.

potentiality is complicated, but suffice it to say that for Aristotle potentiality is a necessary, rather than contingent, property of things. It is the capacity for ontological change, from not-being to being. Kierkegaard, of course, focuses on the existential changes that take place in the individual self. One primary difference, then, between Aristotle and Kierkegaard is that the latter appropriates potentiality and views it through a particular lens: that of human freedom. In other words, whereas Aristotle recognizes the capacity for ontological change inherent in all things (minus the unmoved mover), for Kierkegaard there is—in addition to this general metaphysical property—a human capacity for ontological change that is manifested in the free actions of individuals. Thus, Aristotle’s *dunamis* or ‘potentiality’ does correspond to Kierkegaard’s description of possibility, but not precisely.

In Book Two of the *Physics*, Aristotle states that there are two basic types of change: first, the change of a feature or property, as when the leaves of a tree change color or a young boy grows into an adult man. Second, the change that takes place in ‘coming into’ or ‘going out of’ being.⁶⁶ For instance, when a person dies, materially, they no longer exist, even if the matter out of which they were composed still exists. In Book Four of the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle argues that being can be defined in several different ways, one of which has to do with the potentiality and actuality of things.⁶⁷ In Book Twelve, he suggests that there are “two kinds of being,” and that every natural thing changes from what potentially is (*dunamei*) to what actually is (*energeia*).⁶⁸

As I will articulate further below, this conception of being is echoed in Climacus’s description of the change from possibility to actuality as a movement from ‘non-being’ to

⁶⁶ Aristotle. *Physics* 2.2-3 (Hardie, R. P. and Gaye, R. K., Translators). The Internet Classics Archive, Massachusetts Institute of Technology. <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/physics.html>. See also Vasilis Politis. *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Aristotle and the Metaphysics*. London/New York: Routledge, 2004, p. 55.

⁶⁷ Aristotle. *Metaphysics* IV.2, 1003b9-10 (Ross, W. D., Translator). Blacksburg, VA: Virginia Tech/Infomotions, Inc., 2001. Aristotle also explicates these concepts extensively in *Metaphysics* Theta.

⁶⁸ *Metaphysics* XII.2, 1069b16.

‘being’. To be sure, the language differs: whereas Aristotle describes a movement from potency to actuality, Climacus speaks of a movement from possible being to actual being.⁶⁹ Still, in Aristotle’s definition of *kinesis* we already have the indication that both ‘feature-change’ and transitions ‘from non-being to being’ (or vice versa) may be interpreted as movements within being.⁷⁰ Joe Sachs, in his translation of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, explains that the word *energeia*, usually translated as ‘actuality’, is closer to the idea of ‘being-at-work’. This somewhat Heideggerian rendering implies a continual and complete activity that should not be understood merely as motion or change.⁷¹ Conceiving of actuality as being-at-work resonates with Kierkegaard’s reckoning of the actual as the historical; history is never static, but involves continual change throughout multiple spheres of activity.⁷²

For Aristotle, the essence of a thing is its ‘form’, rather than the material in which it persists. But this essence is also synonymous with the being-at-work of the thing. Thus, the form of a thing is the being-at-work of that thing.⁷³ For example, to quote Sachs, “How does nature display that a squirrel has reached the completion for the sake of which it exists? In the spectacle of the squirrel at work being a squirrel.”⁷⁴ Aristotle insists that the essence of a thing does not

⁶⁹ This is helpfully clarified in Mackey’s essay, “A Ram in the Afternoon: Kierkegaard’s Discourse of the Other.” *Kierkegaard’s Truth: The Disclosure of the Self* (Joseph H. Smith, M.D., Editor). New Haven, CT/London: Yale University Press, 1981, p. 218.

⁷⁰ *Physics*, 201a10-11; *Metaphysics* IV, 1003b10-11.

⁷¹ *Metaphysics* (Sachs edition), p. 174, footnote 8. Sachs explains that the term is not properly translatable into English: “Potency is clearest to us in the capacity for motion or change, but motion itself is defined as a form of being-at-work-staying-complete. But being-at-work is usually reserved for the activities that are not motions. In Aristotle’s discourse, *energeia* is an ultimate explanatory term, not itself explainable by anything simpler or clearer.”

⁷² This is also consistent with the view that we must not conflate the terms reality (*Realitet*) and actuality (*Virkelighed*) in Kierkegaard’s work. (See, for instance, M. G. Piety. “The Place of the World in Kierkegaard’s Ethics.” *Kierkegaard: The Self and Society* [George Pattison and Steven Shakespeare, Editors]. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998, p. 25ff.) While earlier translations typically translated *Virkelighed* as ‘reality’, this is now taken to be insufficient. Instead, “Reality refers, according to Kierkegaard, to the mere presence (*Tilstedeværelse*) of a thing, without any reference to how it came to be there. Actuality, by contrast, is always the result of a process of actualization. Ideas... have reality as such and so does every *created* thing, but only the latter have actuality as well.” (Piety, p. 27, emphasis in original.)

⁷³ Aristotle states, “it is clear that thinghood [substance] and form are being-at-work [actuality].” (*Metaphysics* IX, 1050b1.)

⁷⁴ *Metaphysics* (Sachs edition), p. 179, footnote 14.

change. However, this does not mean that essence is passive. Rather, as being-at-work, essence is changeless activity.⁷⁵ This might lead one to believe that for Aristotle it is material that changes. Things clearly exhibit change as their features change, or as they come into being and pass out of being, and these changes do involve matter. And yet, there is some underlying ‘matter’ that remains constant. Aristotle notes: “matter comes to be and ceases to be in one sense, while in another it does not. As that which contains the privation, it ceases to be in its own nature... But as potentiality it does not cease to be in its own nature, but is necessarily outside the sphere of becoming and ceasing to be.”⁷⁶

In other words, potentiality cannot come to be (since that would imply something out of which potentiality came, which would lead to an infinite regress) or cease to be (since this would involve the cessation of all becoming, which would have to take place prior to its own cessation). Nothing comes from nothing, so there must be some substratum out of which all things come to be. For Aristotle, substances are the only things which are not dependent upon anything else for their existence; that is, unlike all the other categories, which are in some way dependent upon substances, substances themselves exhibit no such dependencies.⁷⁷ Matter is “the primary substratum of each thing, from which it comes to be without qualification, and which persists in the result.”⁷⁸ But this substratum apparently resides outside the confines of coming to be or ceasing to be. Even when there is an apparent privation, there is a substratum in which this privation adheres. Thus, Aristotle makes a distinction between ‘not-being’ in itself, and the ‘not-

⁷⁵ Sachs offers this helpful clarification: “beings do not just happen to perform strings of isolated deeds, but their activity forms a continuous state of being-at-work, in which they achieve the completion that makes them what they are.” (*Metaphysics* [Sachs edition], p. 179, footnote 15.) This raises the question of how to integrate such an account with the traditional picture of the prime mover that contains no activity in itself, since, as a perfect and complete necessary being, it contains all perfections in their entirety and is thus completely at rest within itself.

⁷⁶ *Physics* 1.9.

⁷⁷ See Aristotle’s *Categories*, 1a25 (E. M. Edghill, Translator). The Internet Classics Archive, Massachusetts Institute of Technology. <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/categories.html>.

⁷⁸ *Physics* 1.9; see also Politis, p. 57. Aristotle does not want to call this a substance, however, since it has no specificity or ‘this-ness’. See *Met.* VII, 1029a27-30.

being' of potentiality, which is not strictly in the realm of natural becoming, but neither is it *ex nihilo*.

Potentiality is related to matter, inasmuch as matter is that which contains the potential to become an actual thing. This makes it clear why, for Aristotle, actuality has priority over potentiality.⁷⁹ If potentiality had priority, it seems that nothing could ever come to be, since without some already active essence, some being-at-work, there would be nothing for the substratum to become. For this reason, being-at-work is prior to "every source of motion or rest in general."⁸⁰ Even nature itself, by virtue of its being a source of motion, falls into the category of potency and thus is posterior to being-at-work. Aristotle states, "what is at work always comes into being from what is in potency, by the action of what is at work... some mover is always first, and what causes motion is already at work."⁸¹ Thus, "being-at-work takes precedence in this way too over potency, in respect to becoming and time."⁸²

What, then, is the source of potentiality? Is it matter (being), or is it form (essence)? The answer, it seems, is that matter 'maps' onto potentiality, whereas form 'maps' onto actuality. Aristotle explains it this way: "material is in potency because it goes toward a form; but whenever it is at work, then it is in that form."⁸³ Think again of the example of the squirrel being a squirrel. As the squirrel does what is proper for a squirrel to do, it is a squirrel. A thing is completely itself when it is being-at-work in continual completion. But does such completion really take place? That is, does Aristotle know if/when something becomes 'completely' being-at-work? How would this be ascertained? To simply assert that a thing is complete, in and as

⁷⁹ *Metaphysics* IX, 1049b5-29.

⁸⁰ *Metaphysics* IX, 1049b9.

⁸¹ *Metaphysics* IX, 1049b26-28. This may be why at times it seems that Kierkegaard's explanation of possibility and Aristotle's explanation of actuality are similarly structured.

⁸² *Metaphysics* IX, 1050a3-4. It becomes an interesting question, then, whether Aristotle's 'unmoved mover' is best viewed as pure being-at-work, and what this may entail.

⁸³ *Metaphysics* IX, 1050a17-18.

itself, seems either false or tautological (with perhaps the exception of a perfect being).

Moreover, on Climacus's account, being-at-work cannot apply to human beings in the sense described by Aristotle, precisely because human freedom radically incapacitates essential completion. To be a human being is to be incomplete in this way: to the extent that we are aware of ourselves *as* selves, we are always capable of becoming other than what we currently are.

This becomes clear if we compare Climacus's statement, "All coming into existence occurs in freedom,"⁸⁴ with Anti-Climacus's definition of the self as a "relation that relates itself to itself."⁸⁵ If the self is more than simply a relation between freedom and necessity, but is this relation relating itself to itself, then in the relation which is the self there is an endless fluctuation of existence in freedom that must either find its grounding in that relation, or in another ground.⁸⁶ But, as we will see, Kierkegaard does not believe that the self can rationally find its grounding in itself, and even if it could in principle, this would require an endless process of being-at-work that is simply impossible for the finite human being. Hence the existence of the self remains unsettled. There is a suggestion that Aristotle may agree with this view when, referring to the above statement on potency and form, he says this is the reason why "teachers display a student at work, thinking that they are delivering up the end, and nature acts in a similar way."⁸⁷ This implies that although we may assume that when things are 'being what they are' they have reached their final end, Aristotle does not think this is necessarily the case.

⁸⁴ *PF*, p. 75/*SKS* 4, p. 275.

⁸⁵ *SUD*, p. 13/*SKS* 11, p. 129.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* Anti-Climacus describes this as the self either establishing itself or being "established by another."

⁸⁷ *Metaphysics* IX, 1050a20ff. This suggests that perhaps Aristotle suspects it is false to assert that, based upon the way potency operates in forms, things that are 'being what they are' have reached their final end. It is worth asking whether Aristotle really does agree or disagree with this assertion, and whether that idea is in fact coherent.

Kierkegaard's Appropriation of Aristotle

If this interpretation of Aristotle is correct, then his conception of possibility is perhaps closer to Kierkegaard's than it initially appears. In any case, I suggest that Kierkegaard would disagree with those interpreters like Mary Louise Gill who argue that in Aristotelian potentiality (presumably due to the fact that essences do not change) "the perceiver does not become *other* than it previously was."⁸⁸ For Kierkegaard, in every moment and in every activity, the perceiver (at least the human perceiver) *does* in fact become other than what it was previously. This is why, in the *Postscript*, Climacus explains that existence without motion "is unthinkable."⁸⁹ However, this does not contradict the idea of 'continuous completion', since it is *in the very fact of becoming* that the self is sustained as itself. Being and essence somehow influence one another. Whenever active and passive potencies are united, the joint operations of the potencies may be said to be both changing and uniting the self at the same time, and it is this kind of dialectical change that Climacus proposes.

Not only is it self-contradictory for the necessary to change from not-being to being, given that the necessary does not change, additionally, if the possible *is* the necessary then one's essence would be predetermined, and there would be no opportunity for a person to freely choose to actualize their possibilities. In order to avoid the contradictory results of such an assertion, Aristotle—according to Climacus—formulates "two kinds of the possible instead of discovering that his first thesis is incorrect, since the possible cannot be predicated of the necessary."⁹⁰ For

⁸⁸ Mary Louise Gill. "First Philosophy in Aristotle." *A Companion to Ancient Philosophy* (Mary Louise Gill and Pierre Pellegrin, Editors). Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006, p. 358, emphasis in original.

⁸⁹ *CUP*, p. 308/*SKS* 7, p. 281. Climacus does say that "motion is unthinkable *sub specie aeterni*," but given that Climacus believes the self contains within it the eternal, it follows that he would argue that the self is, in some sense, constantly in motion, which is to say, constantly changing.

⁹⁰ *PF*, p. 75/*SKS* 4, p. 275. Kierkegaard builds upon this idea in his *Journals*: "The necessary is by no means a change in being, as is actuality in relation to possibility, where the essence continues essentially unchanged. But if

Climacus, possibility and actuality differ not in essence but in mode of being. Being remains exclusively the dimension of possibility and actuality as coming-to-be and factual being. That which is antithetical in the realm of being need not be so in the realm of essence. This is what is meant by the statement: “Between the thought-action and the actual action, between possibility and actuality, there perhaps is no difference at all in content.”⁹¹ On an Aristotelian rendering of things, this might be envisioned as a change in matter but not in essence or form. However, it remains unclear whether Aristotle’s conception of matter offers a clear delineation between possible being and actual being, and I cannot further pursue that issue here.

If Kierkegaard does indeed accept this (admittedly somewhat modified) Aristotelian conception of being, it implies a distinction between existential and predicative uses of ‘being’ as relative and absolute, respectively. We are presented with a difference in force or potency but not in essence. Kierkegaard, or at least Climacus, appears to think that kinesis denotes the process of change through which the possible becomes actual.⁹² So how are we to assess Kierkegaard’s interpretation of Aristotle on possibility? There does appear to be a “dichotomy between being and essence” in Kierkegaard’s metaphysics.⁹³ Climacus does not, in my view, do a sufficient job of explaining precisely what is meant by essence. This leaves much to be considered, since, on the traditional Aristotelian view, the essence of a thing determines its being, regardless of its mode of being. With respect to selfhood, if not thinghood, Climacus can be read as reversing this. Glossed in Sartrean language, for the self, ‘existence precedes essence’.

the possible in becoming the actual did become the necessary, its essence would become changed, and thus one can understand that it cannot become the necessary, for if it became the necessary, it would no longer be itself.” (*JP* 262/*Pap* V B 15:1, *n.d.*, 1844.)

⁹¹ *CUP*, p. 340/*SKS* 7, p. 311. This helps to explain why Kierkegaard, as suggested below, rejects absolute necessity and ends up creating the difficulties for himself mentioned below.

⁹² Clare Carlisle. *Kierkegaard’s Philosophy of Becoming*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005, p. 12.

⁹³ Løkke and Waaler, p. 20. On the other hand, Aristotle’s own view of the relationship between being and essence remains rather difficult to ascertain.

Of course, there remains a great deal of debate over how properly to read Aristotle on potentiality. Kierkegaard does interpret Aristotle's ideas for his own ends.⁹⁴ Still, it is perhaps too much to suggest, as Løkke and Waaler do, that "Kierkegaard in effect turns Aristotle's notion of change on its head by regarding essences as subjects of change."⁹⁵ On their view, Kierkegaard defines essences as things that "change their way of being from possibility to actuality *when they become instantiated in objects*."⁹⁶ Essences do not change in themselves. Nor do they cause their own instantiation in objects.⁹⁷ Thus, "Kierkegaard must have had a different conception than Aristotle... of what it is that *causes* the coming into existence."⁹⁸ Aristotle, they note, states that each particular substance "is not only a subject of change, but also has in itself the *source* of change."⁹⁹ They conclude that for Kierkegaard all coming to be requires "an agent other than the subject of change, an agent that causes an essence to be instantiated in an object."¹⁰⁰ Accordingly, they argue that Kierkegaard's position downplays the "notion of substance" and emphasizes the "notion of agency."¹⁰¹

But perhaps this depends on our conception of agency. As Stephen Makin notes, for Aristotle, all change requires some kind of agent.¹⁰² A natural thing contains its own internal agency, whereas an artificial thing is changed by an external agent. For Aristotle, it seems the material of a thing determines its potency.¹⁰³ But Aristotle defines potency, first, as "a source of

⁹⁴ Stephen Makin, for instance, suggests that "it is clear that Aristotle's account of what it is to be potentially *F* incurs high metaphysical costs. It requires a one-one correspondence between forms in the world and the capacities developed by rational agents; and it may be hard to justify the conviction that the correspondence obtains." (Aristotle's *Metaphysics Book Theta with Commentary* (Stephen Makin, Translator). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 166.)

⁹⁵ Løkke and Waaler, p. 27.

⁹⁶ Løkke and Waaler, p. 30, emphasis in original.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid, emphasis in original.

⁹⁹ Ibid, emphasis in original.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Aristotle's *Metaphysics Book Theta* (Stephen Makin, Translator), p. 162.

¹⁰³ "All things which are generated naturally or artificially have matter; for it is possible for each one of them both to

motion or of change, either in something else or in something *as* something else.”¹⁰⁴ A potency is genuine if it has in itself the power to move either another thing, or itself. It is thus not unreasonable to conclude that at least some potencies are also agents. For Kierkegaard this is directly related to human self-becoming. In the case of human selfhood, the self is clearly a natural thing, but it is not simply that.¹⁰⁵ There is both potentiality and being-at-work in the person. The self is its own agent. Other things may be affected by external agents and also affect themselves through their own internal being-at-work. But in the self, the agent appears to be both external and internal at the same time.¹⁰⁶

If, in the self, we have both internal and external agency in the same thing at the same time, this leads to several questions. If the agent is external, how can it be the self? If the agent is internal to the self, how does one explain the movement from non-being to being, given that prior to being there is not a thing in motion? Kierkegaard and Aristotle agree: there must be some ‘prime’ agent beyond the sphere of natural change that provides the means by which things can initially come to be. If it is the continuous being-at-work of a thing that makes it complete, we may conclude that no human self will ever be complete, at least not in an eternal, existentially free sense, which is the sense that matters most to Kierkegaard. Indeed, though some things will be more complete as themselves by virtue of comparison with other things, the only candidate for completeness in the full and true sense would be God.¹⁰⁷ One might rightly suspect, therefore, that only God, for Kierkegaard, can bring about completion to human beings.

Aristotle, for his part, accepts that entities such as the prime mover, which might be

be and not to be, and this possibility is the matter in each individual thing.” (*Metaphysics* IX, 1032a20-21.)

¹⁰⁴ *Metaphysics* V, 1019a16-17, emphasis in original. See also 1046a10-11.

¹⁰⁵ See Aristotle's *Physics* 2.3.

¹⁰⁶ That is, there is a dialectical relation in the self as that which is acting and that which is being acted upon. Conscious self-reflexive thought is always already both the thinking subject and the object of thought. This is portrayed in Anti-Climacus's definition of the self. (*SUD*, p. 13/*SKS* 11, p. 129.)

¹⁰⁷ See *CUP*, p. 118/*SKS* 7, p. 114.

conceived of as essences, are not part of the natural world.¹⁰⁸ The prime mover is the ultimate source of change, and thus of potentiality. But for Aristotle, the prime mover possesses nothing but actuality, so it is difficult to assess how the prime mover might transfer actuality to natural things in potentiality, since there appears to be no movement or change within the prime mover by which any transfer could be made.¹⁰⁹ In other words, Kierkegaard's God (unlike the prime mover), though not a part of the natural world, nevertheless interacts with and relates to the world in eternal freedom. Whether this constitutes an inappropriate reading of Aristotle remains open to debate, but it is consistent with Kierkegaard's use of Aristotelian concepts. It remains the case that Kierkegaard's use of Aristotelian ideas of modality and application of those ideas to his own conception of possibility is unconventional and exhibits a willingness to modify concepts to suit his own ends.

Philosophical Influences: Hegel

Having examined the influence of Aristotelian metaphysics upon Kierkegaard, I now consider the impact of Hegelian metaphysics. It is commonly asserted that Kierkegaard's philosophy was primarily a reaction against Hegelianism; however, this is incomplete. Certainly there are substantial disagreements between Hegel and Kierkegaard. But one should not infer from this that Kierkegaard found nothing of value in Hegel's thought. In fact, Hegel's influence on Kierkegaard is extensive and profound.¹¹⁰ As Clare Carlisle notes, "Kierkegaard inherits from

¹⁰⁸ See *Physics* II.7 (198a28), *Metaphysics* VI.1 (1026a27–31), *Metaphysics* XII.6-10.

¹⁰⁹ To be clear, Aristotle argues that it is the absolute 'desirability' of the prime mover that draws all things to it. This implies that, because things desire the prime mover they will, unless somehow impeded, eventually reach the source of their desire. The question is whether such a movement toward the prime mover exhibits freedom, or whether it is necessitated by the prime mover. The latter would be problematic from a Kierkegaardian perspective.

¹¹⁰ Kierkegaard admits that he admires Hegel and has learned much from him. However, this "enigmatical respect" is set against Kierkegaard's deep disagreement with the existential implications of the Hegelian system. (*JP*)

Hegel a spiritual plane of motion, formed by temporality, subjectivity, and reflexivity, and of course profoundly affected by Christianity.”¹¹¹ But, she continues, “Kierkegaard departs crucially from Hegel in locating this plane *within* each existing individual, which alters the perspective entirely.”¹¹² In other words, rather than relegating possibility to merely its status as a speculative concept, Kierkegaard prioritizes the existential development catalyzed through a recognition of possibilities.

Both Aristotle and Kierkegaard “counteract idealism by searching for a source of motion *within* existing things.”¹¹³ As we have seen, for Aristotle, kinesis denotes the process through which the actual is brought into existence through transition or change. Climacus announces his commitment to this view.¹¹⁴ But such movement, he asserts, cannot happen in speculative philosophy, because in speculation everything already ‘is’; everything is actualized according to axiomatic logic and there is no transition. What Kierkegaard finds so problematic about Hegelian speculation is the confident assertion of its own necessary truth; the completeness of the system, for Kierkegaard, is necessarily inaccessible to human thought.¹¹⁵ Climacus explains that speculative philosophy “deals with possibility and actuality, but its conception of actuality is a false rendition, since the medium is not actuality but possibility. Only by annulling actuality can abstraction grasp it, but to annul it is precisely to change it into possibility.”¹¹⁶ In other words, speculative philosophy confuses categories: by taking all actuality and transferring it into a mode of thinking, it places actuality within the realm of possibility. But since possibility and actuality

1608/*Pap VI B 54:12, n.d., 1845.*)

¹¹¹ Carlisle, p. 17-18.

¹¹² Carlisle, p. 18, emphasis in original.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ *CUP*, p. 342/*SKS 7*, p. 313.

¹¹⁵ George Pattison states that the “world of becoming” is “the ‘unclarifiable background’ of thinking” for Kierkegaard. (Pattison, *The Philosophy of Kierkegaard*, p. 18.) Similarly, Mark C. Taylor declares that Kierkegaard sees all beginnings as arising from “the abyss of free resolution,” which, “defies systematic comprehension.” (Taylor, p. 3.)

¹¹⁶ *CUP*, p. 314-15/*SKS 7*, p. 286-87.

cannot exist in the same space at the same time, actuality is dissolved.

The reverse is also the case: “in the language of actuality all abstraction is related to actuality as a possibility.”¹¹⁷ Thus, when speaking of the actuality of our lives, we speak abstractly only of possibilities, since to speak abstractly of actualities is another confusion; for we live in the realm of actuality, and an abstract actuality would be an incoherent idea. Climacus is not saying abstraction or speculation has no value. Indeed, when it comes to what he calls the “poetic and intellectual” realms, possibility is seen as superior to actuality.¹¹⁸ But this comes with a caveat—we learn that “the esthetic and the intellectual are disinterested... disinterestedness is the expression for indifference to actuality.”¹¹⁹ So, while the mental processes of categorizing and prioritizing possibilities are vital, what finally matters for Kierkegaard is the actualization of possibilities. The actual, willed decision must follow the activity of the intellect or imagination. This opposes Hegelian descriptions of actuality.

Referring to Hegel’s *Science of Logic*, Climacus argues that, in the section titled ‘Actuality’, “actuality is explained, but it has been forgotten that in pure thinking the whole thing is within the sphere of possibility.”¹²⁰ Thought-abstraction is problematic inasmuch as it has the potential to lead one away from genuine selfhood: “The demand of abstraction upon him is that he become disinterested in order to obtain something to know.”¹²¹ Kierkegaard’s insistence that abstraction does not provide the means by which one can actually live as a genuine self is a primary factor in his rejection of what he takes to be the Hegelian vision of necessity. In *The Sickness unto Death*, for instance, Anti-Climacus writes, “it is not the case, as the philosophers

¹¹⁷ *CUP*, p. 315/*SKS* 7, p. 287.

¹¹⁸ *CUP*, p. 318/*SKS* 7, p. 290.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ *CUP*, p. 334-35/*SKS* 7, p. 305.

¹²¹ *CUP*, p. 316/*SKS* 7, p. 288. As Sylvia Walsh puts it, “Climacus... maintains contra Hegel and his followers that existence cannot be thought, for thought always transposes existence or actuality into possibility, thereby annulling it.” (Sylvia Walsh. *Kierkegaard: Thinking Christianly in an Existential Mode*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 39.)

would explain it, that necessity is a unity of possibility and actuality; no, actuality is the unity of possibility and necessity.”¹²² Hegel follows Kant, in that they both argue that simply to say ‘*x* is...’ or ‘there is...’, without providing any content or ‘what’ to *x*, basically amounts to an empty or tautological statement. However, Hegel then goes further and essentially also argues the inverse, claiming that ‘nothing’ is still ‘something’, because, as Hegel declares in *The Science of Logic*, there is not anything in the world that does not contain both being and non-being.¹²³

For Hegel, the beginning of logic is found in indeterminate ‘being’, which in its indeterminacy is equally ‘nothing’.¹²⁴ Because indeterminate being and nothing are at once the same and contradictory, they form an unstable or incomplete relationship which must be mediated/overcome through the coming-to-be of ‘determinate being’, which is to say, this or that particular thing. Then, the particular thing must go through the process of mediation itself, in order to reach the final unity that takes place as the abstract essence of the indeterminate and the concrete essence of the determinate discover that they are one and the same in their most fully realized form: the concept.¹²⁵ Mediation ultimately reveals what has always been true about the concept; namely, that the process of mediation is essential to the concept, though not the essence of the concept. The essence of the concept ‘necessity’, for instance, contains in itself its own contingency; it is not grounded by anything other than itself, but this makes it contingent inasmuch as it has no causal ground. This contingency is a very feature of its necessity; these

¹²² *SUD*, p. 36/*SKS* 11, p. 152. ‘The philosophers’ refers to certain Danish Hegelians, if not Hegel himself.

¹²³ “[N]owhere on heaven or on earth is there anything which does not contain both being and nothing in itself.” (Hegel, *The Science of Logic*. [George Di Giovanni, Editor.] Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 61. Hereafter *SL*.) In Pattison’s words, “neither Being nor Nothing is what it is other than in its identity with its opposite: neither can be regarded in isolation from the other.” (Pattison, *The Philosophy of Kierkegaard*, p. 16.)

¹²⁴ *SL*, p. 47ff.

¹²⁵ Hegel states: “it is only in the concept that something has actuality, and to the extent that it is different from its concept, it ceases to be actual and is a nullity.” (*SL*, p. 30.) Moreover: “The most important point for the nature of spirit is the relation, not only of what it implicitly is *in itself* to what it *actually* is, but of what it *knows itself* to be to what it *actually* is; because spirit is essentially consciousness, this self-knowledge is a fundamental determination of its actuality.” (*SL*, p. 17, emphasis in original.)

essential properties are both present in the concept ‘necessity’, but neither fully expresses the concept on its own. With these points now outlined, let us further consider Hegel’s metaphysics of modality.

A Hegelian Metaphysics of Modality

Surprisingly little has been written on Hegel and modal metaphysics, perhaps because of analytic proclivities toward the topic in recent decades. Christopher Yeomans, however, offers a rich account of Hegelian modalities in chapter seven of his recent book *Freedom and Reflection: Hegel and the Logic of Agency*.¹²⁶ His account is particularly helpful in that it explicates several Hegelian assertions regarding possibility, actuality, and necessity in a way that helps us see more clearly why Kierkegaard may have rejected these views. Yeomans begins by describing Hegel’s response to the problem of “reflected immediacy,” that is, the self’s attempt to unite its objectivity in the world with its self-reflective subjectivity.¹²⁷ In order for any merger to take place between the internal and external, the subjective and the objective, there must be a kind of ‘self-grounding’ that stems from the inner life of the self but is also actively in relation to the outer world. Said differently, in the relation between the world and the thinking subject, it is always the subject who does the relating, and yet the world must also always be present.

This is the Kantian lesson that Hegel accepts; knowledge of reality is not simply given by the world, nor is it merely created by our minds. The structures of both mind and world are

¹²⁶ Christopher Yeomans. *Freedom and Reflection: Hegel and the Logic of Agency*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. Other helpful works include Stephen Houlgate’s “Necessity and Contingency in Hegel’s *Science of Logic*.” *The Owl of Minerva*, Vol. 27, No. 1, Fall 1995, pp. 37-49; Beatrice Longuenesse’s *Hegel’s Critique of Metaphysics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007; and Karen Ng’s “Hegel’s Logic of Actuality.” *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 63, No. 1, September 2009, pp. 139-172.

¹²⁷ Yeomans, p. 142, emphasis in original.

necessary for knowledge. Hegel was dissatisfied, however, with what he viewed as Kant's failure to overcome several rational aporias, including the existence of God and human free will. One of Hegel's primary motivations is to show that reality contains within itself a rational structure, namely, the logic of reflective immediacy that requires the merger of the object and the subject. If this is the case, then Hegel would, in principle, be able to overcome the Kantian aporias. Hegelian logic thus asserts that reality *requires* such aporias, not as incomprehensible barriers to thought, but rather as structures in which thought is able to take place.¹²⁸ Actuality, then, is that category in which the objective and subjective are already united, even if they are not yet aware of that unity. This unity, however, is guaranteed by necessity; thus Hegel can say: "Absolute necessity is therefore the truth in which actuality and possibility in general as well as formal and real necessity return."¹²⁹

Modalities are accordingly complex terms for Hegel (and, as we will see, for Kierkegaard). They cannot simply be viewed as terms in opposition, since they express the fundamental mediation that comprises all reality. According to Yeomans, Hegel seeks "to articulate the relation between possibility and actuality in dynamic terms: the relation is the development of the possible into the actual. In real self-expression, the possible necessarily becomes the actual, which is just a way of understanding the control exercised by the substance that realizes itself in its actual modes of existence."¹³⁰ Every possibility is an actuality waiting to be revealed. What, then, is Hegel's conception of possibility? First, possibility is a multifaceted term. Logical possibility, or those possibilities that are strictly speculative, is not the same as real

¹²⁸ Yeomans, pp. 143-44: "Hegel's demand to find an identity between immediacy and reflection is the commitment that there must be some way of conceiving of reflection not as the process that from outside generates the real or acts on it, but rather as the mode of existence of the real itself... in actuality as a category Hegel is asking us to think of objective reality as having the structure of reflection, which we generally consider to be a subjective form."

¹²⁹ *SL*, p. 487.

¹³⁰ Yeomans, p. 145. Ng puts it this way: "in the end, what determines possibility are the actual facts as determined by thought." (Ng, "Hegel's Logic of Actuality," p. 158.)

possibility. Real possibility, says Yeomans, “adds constraints from the existent background conditions of an event.”¹³¹ This appears to be Hegel’s view: we can make claims about possibility by examining the background conditions of a particular event.

The implication here is fairly straightforward. Possibility, actuality, and necessity are interrelated concepts that each operate on a kind of spectrum.¹³² Each possibility may be actualized or necessitated in relation to the background conditions at play. Actuality expresses both the background conditions and, at a higher level, the new set of conditions that are present (for another possibility) when this possibility is actualized. This raises several questions: How might one determine the threshold at which possibility becomes actuality? Who would be able to make such a determination?¹³³ As Mark C. Taylor notes, for Hegel “real possibility and actuality are finally indistinguishable—the former immediately passes over into the latter.”¹³⁴ And, how could anyone, given that our own thought processes are themselves subject to the possibility of being accurate or inaccurate, ever be able to determine such thresholds, since we would first have to judge the rational structures with which we make such judgments? If, however, we grant this method for conceiving of possibility and actuality, then we can also see how Hegel’s view of necessity takes shape.

Yeomans admits that on Hegel’s view “[t]he factors to which we point are not just evidence for some further fact... they *constitute* that fact of possibility,” but he rejects the idea

¹³¹ Yeomans, p. 150.

¹³² Yeomans says, “We can make modal judgments at any point along a continuum that runs from considering no background conditions (logical modality) to considering all background conditions (absolute modality), but the significance of our judgments varies directly with the extent of background conditions considered.” (Yeomans, p. 151.)

¹³³ Yeomans uses the example of a person (X) who could possibly run a four-minute mile. Yeomans says that, initially, we might think any person can possibly run a four-minute mile. But as we add more factors to the equation (age, health history, exercise routine, etc.) we discover that X either can or cannot run a four-minute mile. Eventually, with certain background conditions in place, it is impossible for X to run a four-minute mile. (But who can determine the point at which such an abstract possibility moves from being possible to being no longer possible? To truly legitimate such a claim, one would have to fully articulate every single factor involved, before the verdict could be made regarding the event’s possibility or impossibility. This seems impossible for a finite being.)

¹³⁴ Taylor, p. 108, emphasis in original.

that such conditions constitute metaphysical necessity.”¹³⁵ However, he then states, “paradoxically, as we go further on the continuum measured by the modal metric towards absolute modality, the more the external determinations that are necessary to bring the possible to actuality are grounded in the possible itself... The more background conditions we include, the less they seem part of the background rather than the foreground of the object.”¹³⁶ Still, he refuses to describe this in terms of necessity, arguing instead that “the seemingly external relation to the existent conditions of possibility of a thing is just as much an internal relation of self-manifestation.”¹³⁷ This explains why, for Hegel, “real possibility no longer has *such an other* opposed to it, since it is real insofar as it is itself also actuality.”¹³⁸

Yeomans continues: “To heighten the air of paradox, these conditions are grounded in the possible *as possible* and thus as inherently involving alternate possibilities... the more detail we build into the idea to be expressed, the more options are available for its expression if we understand by ‘expression’ a true self-manifestation such that what is essential is fully or adequately realized in its external existence.”¹³⁹ But none of this leads to ‘modal determinism’, for two reasons. First, “the process is less production by prior factors beyond one’s control and more self-manifestation.”¹⁴⁰ Second, “the size of the set of possible *expressions*—as opposed to just the variety of possible *following states* (in the causal vocabulary) or *representations* (in the expressive vocabulary)—actually increases as the conditions are further specified rather than decreasing.”¹⁴¹

In other words, rather than taking each action or state of affairs as an independent

¹³⁵ Yeomans, p. 151.

¹³⁶ Yeomans, p. 154.

¹³⁷ Yeomans, p. 154. Cf. *SL*, p. 482: “[The actual’s] relationship to another something is the manifestation of itself.”

¹³⁸ *SL*, p. 484.

¹³⁹ Yeomans, p. 155.

¹⁴⁰ Yeomans, p. 157.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid*, emphasis in original.

expression of necessity or contingency, Hegel appears to be arguing for a relation between necessity and contingency such that the conditions for each impact on the actualization of the other; that is, a thing or action is only necessary if all the contingencies to which that thing relates are in play. Rather than arguing that the more factors influence one's life, the less free one is, Hegel seems to be saying that it is those very factors that provide the space for the freedom a thing or action does have.

Support for Hegel's view may be found in the fact that we have no choice but to structure our experience of the world, and this structuring leads us to assert certain claims about the world, including the fact that some things are necessary. But in making such claims, we are relying entirely on contingent features of the world for our ability to make those claims, and this means we are in effect saying that the necessary and the contingent need each other in order to be what they are. This is not just true of the human being; this 'contradictory' expression of reality is an essential property of the world.¹⁴² We now come to the crux of the issue: Hegel's definition of possibility is such that the possibility of something must include, in its contingent structure, the necessity which would, in itself, make that thing necessary. But that necessity must likewise include the contingency that makes it a possibility. The same dialectic of mediation and overcoming, the *aufhebung* present in the logical movement from being to nothing to becoming, is also present in the logical movement from actuality to possibility to necessity¹⁴³. This is why Hegel can ultimately say that actuality and possibility equal necessity, since each concept contains the others in itself, and all are equally present in the whole, the absolute Idea.

Yeomans realizes that this is counterintuitive. He asks, "What replaces the looseness of fit between the conditions of real necessity and the actuality to which they are therein related? How

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Though, from the perspective of the absolute Idea, no modality is 'higher' or precedes the others.

can a tight fit nonetheless not merely *point to* but somehow *realize* alternate possibilities?”¹⁴⁴ Or, to put it differently, in what sense can we truly say that a strong case for necessity nevertheless still contains some possibility within itself? It would seem, reasonably, that a genuinely necessary thing would contain no possibility within itself, and Hegel might be thought to be describing things that seem, but are not quite, necessary. For surely nothing that is truly necessary contains possibility in itself? Hegel, on Yeomans’s account, claims that necessity and contingency are united such that all possibilities are expressions of its necessity. “The additional feature,” says Yeomans, “is the idea that the conditions themselves become internalized.”¹⁴⁵

A dialectic is at work in the structure of reality: the very things that are necessitated by laws of nature, or God, are themselves the conditions that make it possible to recognize possible contingent alternatives, and it is those very contingencies that shape the conditions by which a thing is said to be necessary. Thus there is a fundamental unity between the possible and the necessary, in the absolute sense. Said differently, absolute necessity is “shaping itself... in part by constructing the matrix of alternate possibilities in terms of which the actually produced action is to be understood.”¹⁴⁶ This helps to clarify Hegel’s claim that “Absolute necessity is therefore the truth in which actuality and possibility in general as well as formal and real necessity return.”¹⁴⁷ This structure applies to every area of life, including human activity. The decisions we make as individuals follow this same pattern. As Stephen Houlgate notes, “We are genuinely freed to our human possibilities, for Hegel, only when we know who or what we truly are, when we recognize that we are free, self-determining, historical beings and when we understand fully the

¹⁴⁴ Yeomans, p. 158, emphasis in original.

¹⁴⁵ Yeomans, p. 160.

¹⁴⁶ Yeomans, p. 161.

¹⁴⁷ *SL*, p. 487. As Yeomans puts it, “For Hegel, then, in the most comprehensive point of view possibility, actuality and necessity all converge: that which is truly actual is necessary because it is the contingent’s process of its own development including as its form the articulated structure of possibility.” (Yeomans, p. 163.)

form that our freedom must *necessarily* take if it is to be a real freedom.”¹⁴⁸

But this view appears to create category confusions. Does Hegelian freedom apply only to human existential actions, or is it a metaphysical assertion? To take a basic example, it may already be controversial to claim that two plus two only equals four because of all the contingent factors that lead to two plus two equaling four. But it seems very odd to say that there is ‘freedom’ in this necessity. In what would such freedom consist? Hegel’s ‘absolute necessity’ may involve a muddle similar to the one that Kierkegaard thinks the concept of ‘absolute possibility’ runs into. One of Kierkegaard’s fundamental critiques of Hegelianism involves the confusion of possibility and necessity in the system. Admittedly, there has been some recent debate over whether Hegel’s claims regarding the necessity of logic are meant to be understood metaphysically, or whether they are better framed in terms of establishing categories of cognition.¹⁴⁹ But even if we grant that Hegel’s endeavor is merely epistemological, Kierkegaard nevertheless faults this epistemology, on the grounds that it offers more than it can actually provide.

Kierkegaard’s critique expresses something like the following: In order to rationally determine any possibility, one has to know all the conditions for that possibility. In this he agrees with Hegel. However, unlike Hegel, Kierkegaard does not think that such knowledge is available to human beings, because knowing all the conditions for a given possibility requires knowing every possible condition, since there are innumerable conditions that remain unknown to us in any given situation.¹⁵⁰ In other words, we are not able to say what is truly possible or impossible,

¹⁴⁸ Stephen Houlgate. *An Introduction to Hegel: Freedom, Truth and History*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005, p. 22, emphasis in original.

¹⁴⁹ For an overview of this debate, see James Kreines, “Hegel’s Metaphysics: Changing the Debate.” *Philosophy Compass*, Vol. 1, No. 5, 2006, pp. 466–80.

¹⁵⁰ Kierkegaard often points to the empirical and rational limitations of human knowledge. See, for instance, *JP* 2254/*Pap* II A 247, August 17, 1838; *CUP*, p. 224, 315ff/*SKS* 7, p. 204, 287ff.

because in order to do so we would need to have complete access to the structures of reality in which these possibilities are maintained. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same would apply to necessity.

This is not to deny the rational structures by which we make sense of the world. We utilize the rational structures given to us, and we can confidently assert their accuracy within certain parameters. But our knowledge of the conditions of possibility is never sufficient to make absolute claims about existing things; we can only do so if we remain within the realm of speculation, where conditions are limited by rational necessity in a manner that differs from their actuality. This is Kierkegaard's criticism of any system that attempts to claim an absolute perspective. For Kierkegaard, even our best speculations are ultimately tentative.¹⁵¹

Johannes Climacus as a Guide

With the preceding philosophical background in place, I now turn to examine Kierkegaard's statements on possibility, actuality, and necessity more directly. As noted in the introduction, I believe that we may legitimately regard Kierkegaard as giving expression to his own ideas through the pseudonyms. This becomes especially credible when a consistent theme is found both in the pseudonymous and eponymous works. Nevertheless, I will respect Kierkegaard's wishes and refer to the names of the pseudonyms when referencing their texts. The bulk of Kierkegaard's philosophically-oriented speculations about possibility take place in the writings of Johannes Climacus: *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific*

¹⁵¹ A Hegelian might respond that Kierkegaard's criticism is short-sighted; of course we do not know all the conditions now, but in principle such complete knowledge is possible, and is indeed required by the necessity of the dialectic. Climacus, however, argues that if the possible and actual are expressions of the necessary, then what is termed 'possible' is, in fact, a mere technicality, since the possible necessarily comes to be. One could reply that these contingent necessities have not yet become actualized and thus are appropriately called possibilities. However, it is only a question of *when* possibilities will become actualized. Upon actualization, they reveal their necessity. Thus, all actual things are necessary.

Postscript. Accordingly, I begin with the *Fragments*, specifically the section titled “Interlude.” Here, Climacus suspends the development of his primary motif (developing an alternative to a Socratic maieutic epistemology) and spends seventeen pages arguing that the past is no more necessary than the future. At first, this may appear to be a textual distraction, a rhetorical ploy meant to mock the speculations of the Danish Hegelians whom Kierkegaard often humorously critiqued. After all, the interlude is typically taken to be a literary representation of the 1,800-plus years between Christ’s birth and Kierkegaard’s own time.¹⁵² So, ought we perhaps to take these metaphysical ruminations with a grain of salt?¹⁵³

I believe Hannay is correct when he suggests that “the interlude is still an integral part of the overall ‘argument’” of the *Fragments*.¹⁵⁴ While not directly connected to the main point, the interlude puts forward an ancillary argument (we cannot simply rely upon historical witnesses for knowledge of Christ’s existence), and also serves as an opportunity for Climacus to speculate—perhaps with a hint of irony, but certainly with a great deal of rigor—about the basis of his entire thought-experiment.¹⁵⁵ For if knowledge is historically determined, there is no need to speculate

¹⁵² Alastair Hannay. *Kierkegaard: A Biography*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 237. See also *PF*, p. 72/*SKS* 4, p. 272.

¹⁵³ Robert C. Roberts argues that the interlude is “similar to an ‘aside’ in a Shakespearean play—helpful, but less than essential to the discussion, and delivered in a markedly different tone of voice from the chapters between which it is sandwiched.” (Robert C. Roberts. *Faith, Reason, and History: Rethinking Kierkegaard’s Philosophical Fragments*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986, p. 99.) He admits that he cannot decide whether it is meant as “a serious attempt at philosophy” or as a more ironic or humorous “design to get us thinking.” (Ibid.) Surveying the evidence on both sides, Roberts suggests that the question cannot be resolved. But C. Stephen Evans argues that the purpose of the interlude is twofold: first, it provides a literary means of giving the reader “the illusion that some time has passed,” that is, the 1800-plus years between Christ and Kierkegaard. Second, the section guards Climacus’s description of faith in the text “against certain possible objections, by analyzing the nature of historical knowledge and belief.” (C. Stephen Evans. *Passionate Reason: Making Sense of Kierkegaard’s Philosophical Fragments*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992, p. 119.) In other words, Climacus is ironically and humorously dealing with important and difficult philosophical issues by placing them in an interlude between chapters of the text. Thus, we need not choose between a creative attempt to motivate thinking and serious philosophical content.

¹⁵⁴ Hannay, p. 239. He notes that the section features perhaps the “most concentrated set of philosophical thoughts to be found in all of Kierkegaard.” Evans agrees, saying that the language used in the section is “easily the most philosophically dense in the book.” (Evans, *Passionate Reason*, p. 119.)

¹⁵⁵ This refers to the three questions asked on the title page of *Philosophical Fragments*: “Can a historical point of departure be given for an eternal consciousness; how can such a point of departure be of more than historical

about the way in which one gains knowledge; one will simply gain it or not, according to predetermined circumstances. Knowing how we gain knowledge, if we can do nothing to effect that gain, adds nothing to Climacus's stated concern: recognizing our eternal happiness, or lack thereof.¹⁵⁶ However, if knowledge is related to freedom, this implies some responsibility on the part of the individual to freely actualize that knowledge, which in turn suggests that we may also be responsible to some extent for our own eternal happiness. This raises a host of philosophical and theological questions, and I take it that Kierkegaard's metaphysics of possibility is, at least in part, responding to some of these concerns.

Two Modes of Being: Possibility and Actuality

In the "Interlude," Climacus describes two basic types of change.¹⁵⁷ First, there is change within existence, from one mode of existence to another. Second, there is the change of coming into existence. In other words, it seems right to say that the movement from non-existence to existence is a kind of change. Climacus then asks, "what is the change (κίνησις) of coming into existence [*Tilblivelse*]?"¹⁵⁸ Typically, he says, change refers to the property of a thing; a property changes but the thing itself remains consistent through the change. But how does this work when something comes into existence? He notes, "if that which comes into existence does not in itself remain unchanged in the change of coming into existence, then the coming into existence is not

interest; can an eternal happiness be built on historical knowledge?"

¹⁵⁶ I take it that the 'historical knowledge' being described here offers only earthly, rather than eternal, happiness. One might suggest that earthly happiness contributes to our eternal happiness. But surely eternal happiness requires no earthly happiness to complete it? This would be like adding one to infinity; infinity gains nothing from the calculation. Of course, this depends on how we define infinity—a Hegelian infinite depends upon all the moments which constitute its infinity: "the infinite is rather essentially only as *becoming*, though a becoming now *further determined* in its moments." (*SL*, p. 118.)

¹⁵⁷ *PF*, p. 73/*SKS* 4, p. 273.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

this coming into existence but another.”¹⁵⁹ One of the basic features of change in an object is the continuity of the object through the change. Otherwise we have two objects, not one. Said differently, *X* does not actually exist if, in the process of coming into existence, *X* becomes *Y*. Now, it does seem that for something to move from non-existence to existence involves a kind of change. But if coming into existence is a change from *X* to *Y*, on what basis can we argue that it is *X* (and not *Y*) that has truly come into being? Thus *X* must somehow remain *X* in the change from non-being to being.¹⁶⁰

At this point, some might argue that Climacus has already put the wrong foot forward by framing the argument in this way. How, they would inquire, does ‘coming-into-existence’ have coherence as a category of being? That is, if *X* is said to come into existence, how do the properties *X* supposedly has prior to its existence relate to *X*’s properties once it exists? It would seem, rather, that something which is presently non-existent has no properties attached to it at all, including the ‘property’ of coming-into-existence. The mistake, it would be argued, is that Kierkegaard assumes there *is* an object prior to its coming into existence. However, as a thinker informed by both Aristotelian and Hegelian ontologies, Kierkegaard acknowledges different modes of being. He distinguishes between actual and non-actual possibilities, and clearly takes it to be the case that non-actual possibilities nevertheless do ‘exist’ in some sense.¹⁶¹ He suggests with without such modes of being we seem unable to answer the above question regarding the nature of the change from non-being to being. To suggest that there is nothing at all before something comes into existence would seem to suggest that things literally come into existence

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, italics his.

¹⁶⁰ Kierkegaard’s view is thus at odds with Hegel’s well-known logical *Aufhebung*, or sublation, of the Law of Excluded Middle.

¹⁶¹ In this sense, Kierkegaard opposes a minimal conception of being such as ‘being is synonymous with existence’ or ‘being is self-identity’. (See, for instance, Peter Van Inwagen, “Meta-Ontology.” *Erkenntnis*, Vol. 48, No. 2/3, 1998, pp. 233-250. Kierkegaard does not share Van Inwagen’s intuitions about the need to define ‘being’ in such a reductive manner.)

for no reason at all. Even if they are nothing prior to coming into existence except ideas in the mind of God, it seems that things must exhibit some continuity in the movement from non-being to being.

Climacus' answer is that coming into existence is a movement that takes place "not in essence [*Væsen*] but in being [*Væren*]." ¹⁶² It is a change from one mode of being (possibility) to another (actuality). He argues that Spinoza's ontological maxim—which states that the more perfection resides in something, the more existence that thing must possess—is ultimately a tautology. What it lacks, he says, is a "distinction between factual being and ideal being." ¹⁶³ Factual being is being that has come-into-being, thus it is actual. Support for this view can be found in a journal entry from 1838, where Kierkegaard writes, "one must assume a real ideal being [*egl. ideel Væren*], which in itself has being before its expression in actual being [*actuelle Væren*], something one can discern in the fact that in speaking of eternal truths one would not say that they now come to be but that they are now revealed." ¹⁶⁴ Kierkegaard is referring to Sibbern's distinction—a distinction that is substantially Hegelian—between being and existence. Being is the overall type or category under consideration, and existence is a mode of that type. ¹⁶⁵

Accordingly, just as Climacus distinguishes between quantitative change within being (*alloiosis*) and coming-to-be (*kinesis*, *Tilblivelse*), he also distinguishes between that which has come to be (being/actuality) and that which has not (non-being/possibility). ¹⁶⁶ This may seem odd; after all, Climacus agrees with Kant's rejection of arguments that put forward existence as a

¹⁶² Ibid. See also *JP* 262/*Pap* V B 15:1, *n.d.*, 1844

¹⁶³ *PF*, p. 41/*SKS* 4, p. 246.

¹⁶⁴ *JP* 194/*Pap* II A 305, December 17, 1838.

¹⁶⁵ Hegel states that "*Determinate* being thus comes to stand over and against being in general; with that, however, the very indeterminateness of being constitutes its quality. It will therefore be shown that the *first* being is in itself determinate, and therefore, *secondly*, that it passes over into *existence*, is *existence*; that this latter, however, as finite being, sublates itself and passes over into the infinite reference of being to itself; it passes over, *thirdly*, into *being-for-itself*." (*SL*, p. 58, emphasis in original)

¹⁶⁶ *PF*, p. 73-74/*SKS* 4, p. 273-74.

predicable property of the being of a thing.¹⁶⁷ Climacus's deductions do not involve the ontological proofs which argue that what is posited necessarily must exist. He makes this clear in his discussion of Napoleon, where he states that "the works do not demonstrate *his* existence unless I have already in advance interpreted the word 'his' in such a way as to have assumed that he exists."¹⁶⁸

But for Climacus the essence of a thing remains the same despite the movements of that essence through various modes of being. If this were not the case, then we would have no way to discern any difference between what is and what will be, for although it is only through recognizing change that we are able to distinguish between things, only by understanding the ways in which things stay the same can we have any basis on which to establish our conception of change. One cannot assume actual existence merely by taking the term 'existence' to be a property like every other. At the same time, Climacus posits both actual and non-actual modes of being. How might we make sense of this? I suggest that his distinctions between the possible and the actual may be profitably illuminated using contemporary modal terminology.

In a recent article entitled "Contingency, Necessity, and Causation in Kierkegaard's Theory of Change," the philosopher Shannon Nason describes Kierkegaard's use of modal terminology in the *Fragments*. Nason says, "Our initial coming into existence contains additional possibilities for existing... our first coming into existence is not our only possibility."¹⁶⁹ Nason continues, "By saying that the change of coming into existence does not happen necessarily, [Kierkegaard] is highlighting the widely accepted philosophical position (at least among contemporary philosophers) that historical (including natural) events are not absolutely or

¹⁶⁷ *JP* 1057/*Pap* X 2 A 328, *n.d.*, 1849-50.

¹⁶⁸ *PF*, p. 40/*SKS* 4, p. 245-46, italics *his*.

¹⁶⁹ Shannon Nason. "Contingency, Necessity, and Causation in Kierkegaard's Theory of Change." *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 20:1, 2012, p. 143.

logically necessary.”¹⁷⁰ This contingency of being can also be described in the language of possible or actual states of affairs. For Kierkegaard, the actual is the historical.¹⁷¹ Although a possible state of affairs is not historical, it would seem intuitively correct to say that it exists as a possibility. Thus, states of affairs can be actual or non-actual, since some are historical and some are not. This sidesteps the semantic problem critiqued by Kant, because it accepts a difference between possible and actual existence.

Nason is concerned, however, that at this point Kierkegaard creates a different problem for himself, by refusing to “consider *different senses* of the possible.”¹⁷² He refers to Climacus’s well-known critique of Aristotle in the *Fragments*. As C. Stephen Evans puts it: “Aristotle reasoned, plausibly enough, that whatever was necessary was surely possible, since it cannot be impossible.”¹⁷³ This led Aristotle to posit two kinds of possibility—necessary possibility (which is actuality) and non-necessary possibility (the possible per se). Climacus appears to reject this distinction, saying that there are not two kinds of possibility, and that Aristotle’s error was to posit that the necessary is possible.¹⁷⁴ For Climacus, the possible cannot be the necessary. This echoes the concern mentioned above, that if one’s essence simply is one’s being-at-work, then a person or thing necessarily is what he, she, or it is, simply by being-at-work.

But this creates a dilemma by implying that no human action can genuinely be free, for every action would necessarily flow from the essence of the person, which is simply to be that person. Freedom would become nothing more than what is necessitated by ‘human nature’, in an Aristotelian sense,¹⁷⁵ rather than involving genuinely free choices on the part of the person. As

¹⁷⁰ Nason, p. 145.

¹⁷¹ Climacus states “Everything that has come into existence is *eo ipso* historical.” (*PF*, p. 75/*SKS* 4, p. 275.)

¹⁷² Nason, p. 147, emphasis in original.

¹⁷³ Evans, *Passionate Reason*, p. 122.

¹⁷⁴ *PF*, p. 75/*SKS* 4, p. 275.

¹⁷⁵ George Stack argues that Kierkegaard’s account of the self’s changing via freedom is an extension of ideas found in Aristotle. Stack asserts that “Kierkegaard’s emphasis upon man’s fundamental potentiality-for (*kunnen*)

already noted, Kierkegaard critiques Aristotle on this point. Nason thinks this is a mistake, and that Aristotle was right to distinguish between two different senses of the possible. Aristotle's point, I take it, was that if what is *not* impossible must be possible, then we have to distinguish further between the contingently possible and the absolutely possible (i.e. the necessary).¹⁷⁶ If Kierkegaard refuses to allow the absolutely possible to be deemed necessary, then he must hold the absolutely possible to be contingent. But this is a contradiction. Likewise, if he says that the absolutely necessary is not possible, that would seem to imply it is impossible. But to say that what is absolutely necessary is impossible is also a contradiction.

Nason seeks to alleviate this problem for Kierkegaard through a close reading of the *Fragments*. He suggests that Kierkegaard “sharply distinguishes between the contingent and the absolutely necessary, but he does not follow Aristotle by attributing a different sense of possibility to the absolutely necessary.”¹⁷⁷ In other words, Kierkegaard agrees with Aristotle regarding the distinction between the contingent and the absolute, but disagrees with Aristotle's application of this distinction *to possibility*, since, according to Climacus at least, possibility is always a contingent term. Nason argues that Kierkegaard “must be employing possibility in a very specific way that excludes absolute necessity.”¹⁷⁸ That is, he is focusing strictly on natural or contingent possibility, and thus leaves aside absolute possibility as something which does not have a place in his theory.¹⁷⁹ For Climacus, changes take place in existence and not in “some

possibilities, rational choice, and rational action is not, as is sometimes suggested, based upon an irrationalistic concept of freedom, but is a recrudescence of Aristotle's conception of the finite freedom of man.” (Stack, p. 67.) Kierkegaard, however, appears to have relied upon Tennemann. The question then becomes: how faithful is this interpretation to Aristotle?

¹⁷⁶ Here is the reason for my modification of Leftow's terminology; since Kierkegaard equates the 'absolutely possible' with necessity, we must be clear that he is *not* saying that all metaphysical possibilities are necessary.

¹⁷⁷ Nason, p. 147.

¹⁷⁸ Nason, p. 148. Ingolf Dalferth essentially argues the same in an essay titled “Selfless Passion: Kierkegaard on True Love.” *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013, pp. 159-180.

¹⁷⁹ Arnold Come argues that the contemporary analytic approach to fixing Aristotle's confusion—simply reducing 'possible' to mean 'what is not impossible' leads to the conclusion that what is necessary is possible and “the

realm of *essences*.”¹⁸⁰ Thus, Nason says, “by becoming actual the possible series is not ‘intrinsically changed’.”¹⁸¹ This coheres with the idea that although there is a qualitative change in the movement from non-being to being, it cannot be a change in essence, because then we would have two different things, one that was present before the change, and one that is present after the change.¹⁸²

For Climacus, then, all change must take place in the domain of existence—which is the domain of contingent (not absolute) possibility.¹⁸³ I will consider this again, when reflecting upon Kierkegaard’s account of the relationship between necessity and freedom, but so far Nason’s argument seems reasonable. For now, I want to note the resonance between Kierkegaardian possibility and contemporary modal philosophy. Kierkegaard’s view appears not too far removed from what might be called ‘Plantingian’ actualism.¹⁸⁴ Although to ascribe to Kierkegaard a contemporary modal theory such as possibilism or actualism would surely be anachronistic, this does not imply that there are no resonances between his ideas and these theories. I suggest, therefore, that although Kierkegaard’s metaphysics of modality should not be viewed as strictly actualistic—Kierkegaard never held to the view that possible worlds are actual states of affairs that exist as abstract objects—Kierkegaard’s modal vision does agreeably cohere with actualism, and viewing his arguments in this light may provide some clarity with regard to his conception of possibility.

‘possible’ is ‘necessary’.” (Come, p. 147.) According to Come, on this account, what is possible is merely that which will, given certain conditions, happen. If those conditions hold, the possible is necessitated. If those conditions do not hold, the possible simply does not happen. Propositionally, then, the necessary is the possible. But this seems incorrect. While it is true that what is possible is what is not impossible, and while this means that the necessary is possible, it does not follow that the possible is necessary. That would only be the case if the ‘conditions’ themselves necessarily held. I take this to be Kierkegaard’s point.

¹⁸⁰ Nason, p. 148. See *PF*, p. 74-75/*SKS* 4, p. 274-75.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸² There remains the question of how one might explain the content of the qualitative movement of change from possibility to actuality.

¹⁸³ I leave aside for now questions about the existence of absolutely necessary states of affairs in the world.

¹⁸⁴ That is, the modal actualism posited by Alvin Plantinga.

Indeed, it has been noted that we may take Plantinga's account of actualism to be replacing "an obscure distinction between two modes of being—possible existence and actual existence—with... an allegedly clear distinction between two kinds of existing states of affairs—those that obtain and those that don't."¹⁸⁵ This 'obscure distinction' certainly seems to echo the terminology used by Climacus in the *Fragments*. We have already noted that for Climacus 'coming into existence' differs from all other types of change, since it is a movement from non-being to being. However, this movement nevertheless takes place within the category of being. It is a movement from one mode of being (possibility) to another (actuality). As Robert C. Roberts explains, "The possibility of the state of affairs exists (as it were) before it is actualized... possibilities can be actualized or left unactualized, and when they are actualized it is they that undergo the change of coming into existence."¹⁸⁶ This resonates with Plantinga's actualism, which posits that all things exist in the actual world, but that some things exist as states of affairs which are not realized in the actual world. Possibilities, as unrealized states of affairs, would fall into this category.

But perhaps my conclusion is too quick. At times, Climacus's language in the 'Interlude' seems blatantly possibilistic: he plainly says that coming-into-existence is a change "from possibility to actuality."¹⁸⁷ Is this not precisely what actualists reject—a movement from the non-actual to the actual? Here we must parse carefully what Kierkegaard means by 'possibility' and 'actuality'. If—as noted above—for Kierkegaard the actual is the historical, then it would seem reasonable to suggest that the possible is the non-historical. But surely this does not mean that

¹⁸⁵ Christopher Menzel. "An Account of Abstract Possible Worlds." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Edward N. Zalta, Editor.). Link: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/actualism/possible-worlds.html>. Plantinga himself describes his account succinctly in his article "Actualism and Possible Worlds." (See *Essays in the Metaphysics of Modality* [Matthew Davidson, Editor]. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, pp. 103-121.)

¹⁸⁶ Roberts, p. 102.

¹⁸⁷ *PF*, p. 74/*SKS* 4, p. 274.

the non-historical does not exist in any sense whatsoever. We do not usually take mathematical concepts like numbers to be historical, and yet it seems reasonable to argue that numbers do exist in some sense. Perhaps Kierkegaard means that possibilities exist similarly in a non-historical manner. Climacus certainly gives that impression when he says, “a being that nevertheless is a non-being is possibility, and a being that is being is indeed actual being.”¹⁸⁸ Here we have an indication that, whatever possibilities are, they have some kind of being; they exist in spite of their ‘non-being’, which appears to be another way of saying that they are not historical. So, the idea of possibilities as non-existent but actual would appear to be out of bounds. Instead, we have possibilities that exist but are somehow not actualized.

Perhaps, then, Climacus’s view gives credence to Lewisian possibilism. But this does not seem like a legitimate option either, since, on David Lewis’s account, possible worlds are existing worlds like our own (understood as alternate-dimension-universes, perhaps) that are not actual due to the indexicality of the word ‘actual’, which Lewis argues makes it impossible for us, in this actual world, to describe any other world as actual, since actual for us always means *this* world in which we exist. The same would be true of a person in a possible world who attempted to speak of our world (i.e. ours would be the ‘possible’ world and theirs the ‘actual’ one).¹⁸⁹ Climacus, however, makes it clear that the possibilities he is describing are ‘in this world’, that is to say, they belong to the actual world of which we are a part. According to him, the “non-being that is abandoned by that which comes into existence must also exist, for otherwise ‘that which comes into existence would not remain unchanged in the coming into existence’ unless it had not been at all, whereby once again and for another reason the change of

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ See Loux, p. 167-172.

coming into existence would be absolutely different from any other change.”¹⁹⁰

Although he uses the language of ‘non-being’, Climacus assumes that the change of coming into being—in spite of its qualitative difference when compared to all quantitative historical change—takes place in a sphere of existence that is not entirely separate from historical change. Possibilities exist as non-being in the sense that they are abstract, speculative, non-historical accounts of things and not actually inhering states of affairs. Actualization is, for Climacus, historical becoming. Both types of change take place within the sphere of ‘being’, which could reasonably be taken to be the actual world.

Yet, although they occupy the same world, thinking is not the same as existing. In the *Postscript*, Climacus says, “To think actuality in the medium of possibility does not entail the difficulty of having to think in the medium of existence.”¹⁹¹ In other words, the hard work of moving from the possible to the actual cannot take place if one is *just* thinking. One must move from abstract thought to existential action if one hopes to actualize thinking. In the *Fragments*, Climacus responds to Spinoza’s ontological maxim, which states that the more perfection comprises a thing, the more existence that thing must possess. Climacus argues this is ultimately a tautology; what it lacks, he says, is a “distinction between factual being and ideal being.”¹⁹² Factual being is being that has come-into-being, thus it is actual. Kierkegaard describes the difference this way: “the concept which is found by conceptually dissolving it into possibility is also in actuality, but there is still something more—that it is actuality.”¹⁹³ Accordingly, it seems reasonable to suggest that Climacus’s account of the possible should not be understood in

¹⁹⁰ *PF*, p. 73-74/*SKS* 4, p. 273-74. One might ask, ‘Why not admit that coming into existence is absolutely different from any other change?’ But for Climacus, such a question would be incoherent, since if the change from non-existence to existence is not within being, it remains within essence, which would mean it is a change within necessity, since essence is necessary. This is a self-contradiction.

¹⁹¹ *CUP*, p. 316/*SKS* 7, p. 287.

¹⁹² *PF*, p. 41/*SKS* 4, p. 246.

¹⁹³ *JP* 1059/*Pap* X 2 A 439, *n.d.*, 1850.

Lewisian terms.

All of this leads me to posit that a ‘quasi-actualist’ rendering of Kierkegaardian modalities is a helpful method which provides a reasonable account of his conception of the possible. When presented with the argument in the terms sketched above, I think Kierkegaard would agree with Plantinga’s statement: “although there could have been some things that don’t *in fact* exist, there are no things that don’t exist but could have [existed].”¹⁹⁴ This corresponds with my first two claims about Kierkegaardian possibility; namely, it distinguishes between actual and non-actual possibilities, and it takes non-actual possibilities to exist in some sense. While the terminology does not match perfectly, the overall thrust of the argument appears to be similar—to show that possibilities really do, in some sense, exist. The existence of possibilities is far from settled, of course, and Plantinga’s account is not without its critics.¹⁹⁵ My purpose here is merely to show that Kierkegaard’s conception of modalities is not as foreign to contemporary philosophical discussions as some might have previously assumed, and that it remains a useful depiction of reality.

Still, we shouldn’t push the resemblance too far. While Kierkegaard’s account exhibits some affinity with Plantingian actualism, it is also clear that he employs the terms possibility and actuality in ways that would, no doubt, seem odd to many contemporary modal philosophers. This is especially notable when he attempts to describe possibility and actuality in terms of non-being and being, respectively. This Hegelian language reflects an idealist framework that the

¹⁹⁴ Plantinga, “Actualism and Possible Worlds,” p. 120, brackets mine. This is also consistent with Climacus’s statement, “Existence is always the particular; the abstract does not *exist*. To conclude from this that the abstract does not have reality [*Realitet*] is a misunderstanding, but it is also a misunderstanding to confuse the discussion by asking about existence in relation to it or about actuality in the sense of existence.” (*CUP*, p. 330/*SKS* 7, p. 301, emphasis in original.) Here, ‘existence’ is the term related to actual existence, whereas ‘reality’ refers to possible existence. The confusion comes when we think that possible (i.e., abstract) existence is something we can talk about as though it actually exists. It makes no sense, for instance, to ask whether I will have lunch today with Batman, since he does not actually exist (though it is possible for him to exist, and thus Batman has reality in the sense of possible existence).

¹⁹⁵ See Kit Fine’s work on modality, for instance.

majority of (analytic) philosophers today would reject.¹⁹⁶ In any case, an important correlated issue becomes how one might realize the non-actual possibilities available to them—how the individual actualizes states of affairs that previously did not obtain, and which now, in conjunction with the actualization, do obtain. We will return to this difficulty. First, though, let's consider further what it might mean for Kierkegaardian non-actual possibilities to 'exist'.

Essence and Existence

Typically, the essence of a thing is taken to be that set of properties which are necessary to constitute the existence of that thing. One major question that then arises is whether or not existence itself ought to be included in that set of properties. In other words, does existence count as one of the properties a thing essentially has, or not? Subsequent to Kant, the answer to this question has normally been 'no'. The only things for which existence is an essential property are necessary beings, if there are such things.¹⁹⁷ For every contingent thing, existence is not considered an essential property of that thing, since to posit that existence is an essential property of a thing implies that it must exist. Kierkegaard supports this Kantian position, and takes issue with what he sees as the idealistic subsuming of existence into essence through the unity of thought and world. As he notes in a journal entry: "What confuses the whole idea of 'essence' in logic is that attention is not given to the fact that one continually functions with the 'concept',

¹⁹⁶ Plantinga refers to states of affairs as abstract objects, and it is unlikely that Kierkegaard would have understood possibilities in this way, given that his conceptions of 'abstract' and 'concrete' were shaped by Hegelian categories.

¹⁹⁷ Indeed, Kant famously argued that existence is not a property at all (see *Critique of Pure Reason*, A596/B624-A602/B630). It is worth noting, however, that many philosophers, particularly in the analytic tradition, disagree with Kant's claim, and there is much debate over whether existence is a property, and if so, whether it is an essential property or not. Plantinga, for instance, argues that Kantian-style arguments, "when they are coherent, seem to show at most that existence is a special kind of property... like self-identity, existence is essential to each object, and necessarily so. For clearly enough, every object has existence in each world in which it exists." (Plantinga, "Actualism and Possible Worlds," p. 110.)

existence [*Existents*]. But the *concept*, existence, is an ideality, and the difficulty is precisely whether existence is absorbed in the concept.”¹⁹⁸

But does this not contradict Climacus’s assertion that possibilities also ‘exist’? Does a belief in the existence of possibilities not compel Kierkegaard to say that there are contingent things for which existence is an essential property? Kierkegaard’s point, I suggest, is that existence (like being) cannot be so easily domesticated as a term. He argues that concepts and ideas do not exist in the same way as actual things, and attempts to unify modes of existence result in equivocations. That is, when existence is used in an ideal sense, it is not really existence we are describing but the concept ‘existence’, which is an abstract characteristic and not actual existence. Kierkegaard contends that a concept adds nothing to reality; or, said differently, the concept by itself contains only the sense of actuality found in a non-obtaining state of affairs (it is the being that is ‘nevertheless non-being’, rather than the being that is truly being): “Nothing is added to a concept whether it has existence or not; it is a matter of complete indifference; it indeed has existence, i.e., concept-existence... But existence corresponds to the individual; as Aristotle has already taught, the individual lies outside of and is not absorbed in the concept... a particular human being is certainly not concept-existence.”¹⁹⁹

Put simply, the existence of an individual person is qualitatively different from the existence of, say, the number two.²⁰⁰ Thus, in terms of essence, we can speak of a sort of basic existence that must hold logically, but this is merely concept-existence, and we fall into a category error when we take that to necessarily be the same as actual, historical existence. Similarly, Climacus notes in the *Fragments*, “as soon as I speak ideally about being, I am

¹⁹⁸ *JP* 1057/*Pap* X 2 A 328, *n.d.*, 1849-50, emphasis in original.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁰ I am granting the belief that numbers exist in more than a nominal sense.

speaking no longer about being but about essence.”²⁰¹ The essence, or ideality, of a thing (including its concept-existence) remains the same despite the movement(s) of that thing through various modes of being. If this were not the case, then we would have no way to discern any genuine difference between what is and what will be.

Said differently, “The content of the idea... remains the same through its coming into existence. Otherwise, it wouldn’t be the particular idea... but another idea that comes into existence.”²⁰² Something essential persists through all change, if a thing is to be itself at all; this is its concept-existence. An example would be my essential property of being a human.²⁰³ However, once something is actualized, it exhibits not only concept-existence, but also actual existence. This actual existence is of a different type; it is a different mode of being. Just because it is essential that I am a human does not mean it is necessary that I must exist. The same is true of possibility; there is the mode of possibility which is found in the conceptual rationalization of a thing’s being metaphysically possible, and there is the mode of possibility made manifest in the recognition of that possibility as a genuine existential possibility, and then turning that possibility into an actuality.

But what does it mean for the essence of the possible to be that which remains consistent *in the change from possibility to actuality*? Climacus seems to think that everything that is possible is *essentially* possible; that is, its possibility is an essential property. To put it somewhat redundantly, something cannot be possible if possibility is not one of its essential properties. As ideal being, all possibilities are essentially possible. On the other hand, in the realm of actual being, possibility is the opposite of actuality, since the possible is what may exist (but does not),

²⁰¹ *PF*, p. 42/*SKS* 4, p. 246.

²⁰² Nason, p. 149.

²⁰³ Of course, what a human being really is can be debated. But there is less debate over the fact that if I were no longer a human being, I would cease to be what I am.

whereas the actual is what does in fact exist. As we will see, this leads Climacus to posit that once an existential possibility is actualized, it is eliminated as a possibility. That is, existential possibilities are contingent, whereas essential possibility is necessary. This again implies that essential possibility, or what we might call absolute possibility, is a unique category. It appears to be at once outside the domain of actual existence and yet necessary for all existing things. Otherwise, Climacus is arguing that everything has essential possibility, but actual things contain no possibility. This is an obvious contradiction.

Hence, we can suppose that Climacus is not suggesting that there is no such thing as absolute possibility. Rather, he is saying that absolute or *ideal* possibility, as a determination within essence, remains fundamentally grounded in that domain. As a result, ideal possibility, though essential to them, is only abstractly linked with existing things, whose existence is not synonymous with their essence (i.e., not necessary). Climacus, then, is arguing that to ascribe non-ideal possibility to what is, strictly speaking, necessary is a mistake, and that precisely such an illegitimate move made it possible for Hegelian idealism to smuggle necessity into existence at the expense of freedom. Climacus is adamant: “No coming into existence is necessary—not before it came into existence, for then it cannot come into existence, and not after it has come into existence, for then it has not come into existence.”²⁰⁴

This provides some insight into why Climacus describes possibility and actuality as speculative coming-to-be and factual being, respectively, which—as categories of being—cannot productively coexist.²⁰⁵ He is unwilling to let the necessary confuse the possible, because possibility is related to actual things (more specifically, actual individual selves) rather than mere

²⁰⁴ *PF*, p. 75/*SKS* 4, p. 275.

²⁰⁵ *PF*, p. 74/*SKS* 4, p. 274. Louis Mackey explains it this way: “Not only the excluded possibility (-A, for example, when A is actualized), but also the actualized possibility (A)... is negated *as* possibility when it is made actual. Possibility and actuality are mutually exclusive.” (Mackey, “A Ram in the Afternoon,” p. 219, emphasis in original.)

speculation *per se*. However, because possibility and actuality “are not different in essence but in being,” the implication remains that possibility and actuality are still related, even though they are antithetical existential categories which will annihilate each other.²⁰⁶ How can this be? As essential categories of being, the actual and the possible are both, in some sense, ideal, even as they are brought into being, either by thought or by action (at which point the actual and the possible become contraries). In the ideal sphere, actuality can only be conceived of as possibility. As Climacus articulates in the *Postscript*: “What, then, is actuality? It is ideality. But esthetically and intellectually ideality is possibility (a transfer *ab esse ad posse*).”²⁰⁷

If this seems obscure, recall the point made above regarding the two modes of being. The content of a thought remains ideal—remains possibility—even though we are actually thinking it. Existential being, on the other hand, involves the movement from ideal being to factual being through the actualization of our thoughts. This is the coming-into-being which is vital for genuine selfhood. This is what Climacus mean when he says, “Between the thought-action and the actual action, between possibility and actuality, there perhaps is no difference at all in content... Actuality is interestedness by existing in it.”²⁰⁸

Note that Kierkegaard never claims that the objects of our thoughts are merely representations of the ideas we conceive. There is a real world in which we exist. However, it is absolutely vital that each moment of existence is also actualized by the particular individual who is encountering the world. There is, in Climacus’s words, a “crucial difference” between possibility and actuality: while in the abstract, possibility is ‘higher’ than actuality due to its universal and rational nature, when considering the life of the person, where “the conceived

²⁰⁶ Ibid. This reading is supported by Anti-Climacus’s ‘response’ to Climacus in *The Sickness unto Death*. With the exception of despair, he says, “thinkers say that actuality is annihilated possibility, but that is not entirely true; it is the consummated, the active possibility.” (*SUD*, p. 15/*SKS* 11, p. 131.)

²⁰⁷ *CUP*, p. 325/*SKS* 7, p. 296.

²⁰⁸ *CUP*, p. 340/*SKS* 7, p. 311.

possibility is not an end in itself but a goal to be actualized,” actuality is ‘higher’ than possibility.²⁰⁹ So, we find a dialectical tension in Climacus between the absolutely possible, which is speculatively higher than the actual inasmuch as its necessity must hold logically, and the contingently possible, which in existence is lower than the actual inasmuch as the possible does not contain the being which is needed for a thing to actually *be*—that is, the existential movement cannot take place as long as it remains only within the domain of the possible.

In the *Postscript*, Climacus further develops his view by distinguishing it from the position of speculative philosophy, which he claims puts forward the following proposition: “Actuality is an *inter-esse* between thinking and being in the hypothetical unity of abstraction.”²¹⁰ In other words, it is argued that actuality is where thinking and existence meet, and this meeting is in the idea. But Climacus disagrees with this claim. He states that, in speculative thought, the mistake is precisely that the thinker refuses to accept that their ideas do not contain actuality, but possibility.²¹¹ This is true of the aesthetic as well as the speculative thinker. Traces of this argument are already present in *Either/Or*, where Judge Wilhelm criticizes the aesthete’s lack of a connection to reality. The aesthete’s entire existence is a ghostly emptiness.²¹² He is unaware of (or refuses to admit) the distinction between possibility and actuality, and conflates the latter into the former. Climacus echoes this critique when he states, “An abstract continuity is no continuity.”²¹³

In Kierkegaard’s ethical stage, where the self admits it must take responsibility for itself and must relate itself to the actual world (instead of relating only to the immediate, or possible), the situation changes. Here, a self recognizes that if it thinks about an actuality, it is in fact

²⁰⁹ Come, *Kierkegaard as Humanist*, p. 149.

²¹⁰ *CUP*, p. 314/*SKS* 7, p. 286.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

²¹² *EO* 2, p. 11, 198/*SKS* 3, p. 20-21, 191-92.

²¹³ *CUP*, p. 312/*SKS* 7, p. 284.

thinking about a possibility, since it is asking about something about which it must decide. There is action in the ethical, whereas action is not required in aesthetic or intellectual positions.

Climacus notes, “[I]n asking ethically with regard to my own actuality, I am asking about its possibility, except that this possibility is not esthetically and intellectually disinterested but is a thought-actuality that is related to my own personal actuality—namely, that I am able to carry it out.”²¹⁴ Because the truth is the “how of the truth,” and not only the ‘what’ of the truth, we must remain wary of category confusions.²¹⁵ If we attempt “to distinguish between possibility and actuality... actuality and deception are equally possible... Only the individual himself can know which is which.”²¹⁶ That is, when considering possibilities, we cannot ignore those that are distasteful to us, including the possibility that we are mistaken.

This is why action becomes vital; only by lived decision can we hope to distinguish our possibilities from our actualities. Thus Climacus says, “The only actuality there is for an existing person is his own ethical actuality.”²¹⁷ Again, this is not to say that there is no actual world beyond our ethical choices. This would be self-defeating, since the ethical person requires an actual world in which the choices they make have meaning. Rather, Climacus is noting the frivolousness of existing in a world where one never *does* anything. Indeed, such a speculative existence is, for all intents and purposes, impossible. Moreover, ethical existence is a viable option only for the individual—that is, no one can make the ethical movement from possibility to actuality for anyone else: “The ethical can be carried out only by the individual subject, who then is able to know what lives within him... with regard to another’s actuality he knew nothing about

²¹⁴ *CUP*, p. 322-23/*SKS* 7, p. 294.

²¹⁵ *CUP*, p. 323/*SKS* 7, p. 294.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.* Climacus is concerned here with those who would rather spend their time *speculating* about their lives than actually *living* their lives.

²¹⁷ *CUP*, p. 316/*SKS* 7, p. 288.

it before he, by coming to know it, thought it, that is, changed it into possibility.”²¹⁸ Likewise, “The only actuality which I do not change into a possibility by thinking it is my own, because my actuality *allem meinem Denken zuvorkommt* [precedes all my thinking].”²¹⁹ Thus there is a multidimensional relationship between possibility and actuality both in the individual’s relation to herself and in the individual’s relation to other subjects and objects.

It remains a question whether the individual can ever really know the difference between possibility and actuality, since if “deception can reach just as far as actuality” it is difficult to see how even the individual herself can be certain of her own actuality.²²⁰ Indeed, Anti-Climacus eventually marks this dilemma as constituent of two prevalent forms of despair [*Fortvivlelse*]—the despair of false possibility, and the despair of false actuality.²²¹ As we will see, the person who remains stubbornly entrenched in the possible eventually succumbs to despair. Furthermore, to the extent that every human being is a synthesis of the possible and the actual, we all experience the anxiety that leads to despair. In light of this situation, Climacus reminds us that we must be vigilant: “When the esthetic and the intellectual inspect, they protest every *esse* that is not a *posse*; when the ethical inspects, it condemns every *posse* that is not an *esse*... In our day everything is mixed together.”²²² This is always the case with thought. There is a mixing of categories, precisely because we are never able to distinguish between them with anything more than varying degrees of approximation. But, since approximation never guarantees success, it is insufficient for ascertaining whether one has overcome despair or not.

²¹⁸ *CUP*, p. 320-21/*SKS* 7, p. 292.

²¹⁹ *JP* 3654/*Pap* VI B 54:13, *n.d.*, 1845.

²²⁰ *CUP*, p. 323/*SKS* 7, p. 294.

²²¹ *SUD*, p. 35ff/*SKS* 11, p. 151ff.

²²² *CUP*, p. 324/*SKS* 7, p. 295.

Possibility, Actuality, & Necessity

Let me now expand on what Kierkegaard means by ‘necessity’, and how he tries to untether his use of the term from its then-typical Hegelian appropriation. This involves considering his account of the relation between necessity and freedom, since he maintains a strict dichotomy between necessity and freedom, even to the point of rejecting (albeit indirectly) a certain kind of necessity as a legitimate domain for the possibilities with which he is primarily concerned. As already noted, for Climacus, what is necessary cannot come into existence, since coming-into-existence always involves a change, and something necessary “is always related to itself and is related to itself in the same way...”²²³ In other words, the necessary is unchanging. So, when Climacus asks the question ‘Is the past more necessary than the future?’—the answer, of course, is ‘No’—he is asking about “historical becoming.”²²⁴ It is a query into the relations between modalities and history.

The claim that all coming-into-existence involves a transition from not existing to existing creates a dilemma: in order for something to change, it must be something which has the potential for change. Change must be a genuine possibility. But, on the other hand, if the change involves ‘coming-into-existence’, how can something which does not exist have the potential to become anything at all? In that case, there is no way to explain its existence. Climacus’s answer, as noted above, is that in the movement from non-being to being, the “non-being that the subject of coming into existence leaves behind must itself have some sort of being... such a being that nevertheless is a non-being is possibility... and the change of coming into existence is the

²²³ *PF*, p. 74/*SKS* 4, p. 274.

²²⁴ Mark Taylor has helpfully elucidated this point. See Taylor, p. 125.

transition from possibility to actuality.”²²⁵ But this has nothing to do with the necessity of an actual thing; in *Fragments Climacus* emphatically claims that the necessary cannot come into being, because the necessary always already is.²²⁶ Necessity, he says, “stands all by itself.”²²⁷

Nevertheless, for Climacus necessity and possibility both belong to the ideal in some sense. Necessity belongs to the ideal, as might the propositional statements ‘ $A = A$ ’ or ‘if p , then q ; p , therefore q ’. These statements are ideal or logical truths. They cannot, however, by themselves provide any basis for existential action. The confusion stems from the aforementioned equivocation regarding the term existence. The truths of logic may be said to ‘exist’ in a manner that is appropriate to their ideality, but they never occur ‘in existence’.²²⁸ However, there is also ‘ethical’ ideality. Here, possibilities present themselves as ideal options towards which an ethical subject ought to strive. And, once the ethical subject has made a decision, that possibility is actualized (for good or for ill), which is to say that the ideal becomes the actual. For example, if we assume that actualizing the ‘good’ is essential to the production of a self, then if that self begins to actualize the good through some ethical decision, while there has been no change in the essence of her humanity per se, there has been a change in her self-being—she is *becoming* good.²²⁹

Kierkegaard’s notions of possibility and necessity differ from the notions that were dominant among the Hegelians in Copenhagen, some of whom were Kierkegaard’s professors at

²²⁵ *PF*, p. 74/*SKS* 4, p. 274.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*

²²⁷ *Ibid.* Here, again, it may be helpful to compare Plantinga’s view with Climacus’s. Plantinga states, “every object has existence in each world in which it exists. That is not to say, however, that every object is a *necessary being*. A necessary being is one that exists in every possible world; and only some objects—numbers, properties, pure sets, propositions, states of affairs, God—have this distinction.” (Plantinga, “Actualism and Possible Worlds, p. 110.) Although they may disagree about the essence of existence, both Plantinga and Climacus are clear that *the necessity of existence* is not the same as *necessary existence*.

²²⁸ I thank George Pattison for clarifying this point in an email exchange.

²²⁹ As we will see, however, Kierkegaard’s view of the doctrine of sin complicates this claim. It would be worth considering the extent to which a person is responsible for developing/maintaining their own essence, or whether this is entirely the responsibility of God.

the university. Climacus takes issue with the suggestion that necessity is the unity of possibility and actuality.²³⁰ He points out that such a view, if taken at face value, leads to a logical problem, since, if the essence of the necessary is to *be*, there is no role for possibility in the relation. This nullifies the unity which is posited in the argument. After all, what ‘possibility’ remains for a necessary essence? It seems that what is necessary is no longer *possible*, it simply *is*. How can what is necessary be a source of possibility? Again, the usual response to this criticism is to point out the logical inconsistency in Kierkegaard’s view; if one says that the necessary is not possible, this is a logical contradiction, since it must be possible if it exists, and the necessary exists necessarily. But Kierkegaard insists that it is inappropriate to use the term ‘possibility’ when conceptualizing necessity.²³¹

Kierkegaard’s willingness to risk logical incoherence at this point might be chalked up to a weakness in his own account, or it might indicate the extent to which he sought to combat a Hegelian account of necessity. To see why this might be the case, let us approach the subject from another direction, by asking the following question: if something is both possible and actual, does it become necessary? Apparently not. To give an example, it is possible that I am sitting at this desk typing on my computer, and I am actually doing so. But this does not mean it is necessary that I am sitting here and typing. However, Hegel is often interpreted as having argued that if something is both possible and actual it means that, in the development of absolute spirit, that thing is also necessary, since it is part of the systematic movement of spirit.²³² In other

²³⁰ *PF*, p. 74ff/*SKS* 4, p. 274ff.

²³¹ *Ibid.* Climacus states that necessity is “not a qualification of being but of essence, since the essence of the necessary is to be.” As possibility and actuality *are* qualifications of being, they are categories of an entirely different type and should not be taken to correspond directly with necessity. Given these considerations, I am sympathetic to Come’s suggestion that although “the concept of possibility is more central to Kierkegaard’s concerns than that of necessity,” nevertheless, “it was the spectre of ‘necessity’ that constantly haunted his thinking and proved the more difficult for him to come to terms with.” (Come, *Kierkegaard as Humanist*, p. 178.)

²³² “We are genuinely freed to our human possibilities, for Hegel, only when we know who or what we truly are, when we recognize that we are free, self-determining, historical beings and when we understand fully the form that

words, the continual activity of possibility reveals its own necessity. Presumably, rather than viewing necessity as the active force in the triad, we could interpret the ever present dialectic of possibility and actuality as catalyzing the necessity already implicit in their interactions. As a result, possibility is continually sublating itself; possibility brings about its own overthrow each time it becomes actualized.²³³

Climacus sees things differently. In his view, the Hegelian attempt to dialectically unite possibility and actuality *in the existential domain* leads to the confusion of both terms. For Climacus, an existing actuality cannot at the same time be an existing possibility. (This is not the case with a conceptual possibility—here Kierkegaard is willing to follow Hegel.) That is, when an existential possibility becomes actuality, it not only eliminates all the other possibilities which could have been actualized in that setting, but also eliminates itself as a possibility.²³⁴ Unlike the Hegelian account, which sees possibility and actuality in an infinite dialectic, the Kierkegaardian account places strict limitations on the relations between possibility and actuality within existence. The upshot of the Hegelian argument, Climacus thinks, is that every possibility reveals its own tacit necessity, since the actual exists due to the never-ending activity of possibility. However, this would imply that literally everything which exists does so necessarily—a serious logical concern.

Hegel, however, might respond at this point that Kierkegaard has simply not followed the

our freedom must *necessarily* take if it is to be a real freedom.” (Houlgate, p. 22, emphasis in original.) Cf.: “Hegel proposes that we take the actual to be those given modes that present themselves as expressions (thus a ‘form-unity of inner and outer’), but understand them in relation to the absolute or substance itself, which is the result of a reflection on those modes that sees them as grounded in a deeper possibility that is thereby revealed. And on this picture, the development of the possible into the actual is understood to be itself necessary.” (Yeomans, p. 144.)

²³³ See *SL*, p. 478ff. Hegel explains the dialectical movements of possibility and actuality and describes the unity which results from their interactions. For instance, he states on p. 484: “In self-sublating real possibility, it is a twofold that is now sublated; for this possibility is itself the twofold of actuality and possibility.”

²³⁴ Climacus states: “the possible (not merely the possible that is excluded but even the possibility that is accepted) turns out to be nothing the moment it becomes actual, for possibility is *annihilated* by actuality.” (*PF*, p. 74/*SKS* 4, p. 274, emphasis in original.)

logic of possibility through to its appropriate conclusion; possibility *must* have its negation present within itself in order to be possibility. In other words, possibility necessarily requires the conditions of actuality to be both possible and impossible, which means not only that there is a necessity within possibility, but also that possibility cannot be possible without an actual against which, or through which, it moves in its becoming possible. Thus, Hegel can say,

Possibility is the in-itself which is only positedness and hence essentially otherness. Formal possibility is this identity as transition into the other as such; but real possibility, since it has the other moment of actuality within it, is already itself necessity. Hence what is really possible can no longer be otherwise; under the given conditions and circumstances, nothing else can follow. Real possibility and necessity are, therefore, only *apparently* distinguished; theirs is an *identity* that does not first *come to be* but is *already* presupposed at their base.²³⁵

Climacus, the proponent of existential freedom, understandably rejects this conclusion, arguing instead that the elimination of any particular existential possibility, or set of possibilities, does not equal the necessity of what is actual.²³⁶ Rather, each existing actuality has, by virtue of being actual, eliminated each now-actualized possibility that was present in its related conceptual unity of possibility and actuality. According to Climacus, precisely because existential possibility is annihilated by actuality, the Hegelian attempt to unite both actuality and possibility in/as necessity fails; what is necessary cannot contain any element within itself that either has been or will be annihilated, since it is an essential property of the necessary that it does not change. Hence, any elimination of possibility within the necessary would, by virtue of by that elimination, reveal that what was thought to be necessary is not after all. This is why Climacus states that “by coming into existence, everything that comes into existence demonstrates that it is not necessary.”²³⁷

²³⁵ *SL*, p. 484, emphasis in original. Hegel does then go on to distinguish ‘relative’ and ‘absolute’ forms of necessity, but this appears only to solidify his main point regarding the unity of possibility and actuality within necessity.

²³⁶ *PF*, p. 74ff/SKS 4, p. 274ff.

²³⁷ *PF*, p. 74/SKS 4, p. 274. A keen reader may question whether my account is consistent with *SUD*, where Anti-

Summary

This opening chapter has argued that Kierkegaard maintains in his works a nascent ontology of possibility, in spite of his conspicuous refusal to promote metaphysical speculations. His account of modality, though not intended for any such purpose, carries with it several features commensurable with contemporary actualistic accounts of modal metaphysics. However, it is becoming clear that for Kierkegaard any conception of possibility must be tied to a rejection of absolute necessity; that is, what is possible cannot be necessary, at least, in a Hegelian sense. In other words, Kierkegaard's ontology of possibility requires, as a fundamental component, a robust conception of freedom, since without freedom there can be no genuine possibility, at least not in the sense that matters most—the existential possibilities available to each person.²³⁸ Accordingly, in the next chapter I will provide an overview of Kierkegaardian freedom and its role in the actualization of possibilities.

Climacus seems to rebut Climacus: “thinkers say that actuality is annihilated possibility, but that is not entirely true; it is the consummated, the active possibility.” (*SUD*, p. 15/*SKS* 11, p. 131.) While this may seem contrary to my claims, I suggest that in fact if we take into account the multilayered nature of possibility, we find that both Climacus and Anti-Climacus are correct; the existential possibility is annihilated, but the metaphysical possibility remains active in the mode of actuality. However, since it is now an actuality, the only sense in which it can properly be called a ‘possibility’ is in the abstract sense, but this does not dictate what actually exists.

²³⁸ It is important to note that Hegel also has a well-developed account of freedom; however, as we will see, Kierkegaard takes issue with what he considers to be several serious flaws in that Hegelian account.

Chapter Two: Possibility and Freedom

Introduction

In my opening chapter, I provided an account of the inchoate metaphysics of modality in which Kierkegaard develops his ontology of possibility. Kierkegaard rejects the necessity of the self and the world; rather, he proposes a multilayered conception of possibility that is bound to a particular conception of freedom. Accordingly, in this chapter I offer an account of Kierkegaardian freedom and consider freedom's role in the actualization of both metaphysical and existential possibilities. In order to make this apparent, Kierkegaard's view of freedom must be delineated and nuanced. Given that some of his pseudonyms view freedom as fundamentally inexplicable (and, indeed, I suggest that Kierkegaard shares this view), it may be that we cannot sufficiently define freedom in rational terms.²³⁹ I affirm that this is indeed the case; however, I will attempt to show that there are substantial links between freedom and possibility for Kierkegaard, and, in establishing these links, a fruitful account of Kierkegaardian freedom may be established.

Kierkegaard's Multifaceted View of Freedom

It is probably a gross understatement to say that Kierkegaard was concerned with freedom.²⁴⁰ His reputation, for good or for ill, is bound up together with arguments for individuality, subjectivity, and the indispensability of free decision. But the contours of

²³⁹ Haufniensis, for instance, asserts that freedom "is infinite and arises out of nothing." (CA, p. 112/SKS 4, p. 414-15.)

²⁴⁰ Arnold Come even goes so far as to say that "Kierkegaard's understanding of 'freedom' is the fulcrum on which everything else balances or around which everything else turns in his entire thought structure, in his total picture of the human being, society, world-history, nature, and God." (Come, *Kierkegaard as Humanist*, p. 109.)

Kierkegaardian freedom must be clarified, not only because of the particular ways in which he describes freedom, but also due to the key relation between freedom and possibility. Indeed, at times Kierkegaard almost seems to equate the two. While I disagree with those who suggest that ‘freedom’ and ‘possibility’ are interchangeable terms for Kierkegaard, it does seem clear that they are closely related.²⁴¹ One of the goals of this chapter is to explore the intricacies of that relationship. The first point to be made is simple enough: freedom, like possibility, is a multifaceted idea for Kierkegaard. Louis Pojman, while positing that freedom is perhaps “the central concept” in Kierkegaard’s philosophy of religion, puts the point succinctly: though freedom is a single concept for Kierkegaard, it also “has various forms or levels of meaning, of which some are more adequate than others.”²⁴²

To provide just one example of this intricacy, it is debatable whether the freedom cynically described by the aesthete in *Either/Or* is technically the volitional freedom put forward by Judge William.²⁴³ However, even if they are operating with the same definitional framework, it is plain that the Judge believes A’s relation to freedom is lacking and ill-founded.²⁴⁴ He also critiques the philosophy that “sees history under the category of necessity, not under the category of freedom, for even though the world-historical process is said to be free, this is in the same sense as one speaks of the organizing process in nature... what it actually demands is that one

²⁴¹ See Come, *Kierkegaard as Humanist*, p. 56.

²⁴² Louis Pojman. “Kierkegaard on Faith and Freedom.” *Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 27, 1990, p. 49.

²⁴³ According to Michelle Kosch, the aesthete (A) defines freedom “in the sense of freedom of action, never in the sense of freedom of will.” (Michelle Kosch. *Freedom and Reason in Kant, Schelling, and Kierkegaard*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 149.) Judge William critiques A from an ethical perspective and, accordingly, views freedom primarily as willed. Come similarly notes that “Kierkegaard uses the term ‘freedom’ in two senses in order to indicate the two forms of this definitive element of human existence. First, there is what he calls ‘freedom’s possibility’, the sheer capacity of ‘being able’ without any definition of what one is able to do. Secondly, freedom is the act of choosing, choosing to be what one is, and especially choosing to actualize (become) one’s possible self.” (Come, p. 56.)

²⁴⁴ See *EO* 2, p. 192, 218-19/*SKS* 3, p. 186, 209-10.

must act necessarily, which is a contradiction.”²⁴⁵ The expectation is that a kind of freedom exists wherein free human actions have a reality and meaning not limited by natural determinism.

This multilayered vision of freedom can be found throughout Kierkegaard’s writings. But my primary purpose is not to offer a philosophical analysis of Kierkegaardian freedom per se.²⁴⁶ Rather, I want to probe some of the particular contours of this freedom as they relate to possibility. Specifically, I am concerned with the following five correlations (though this is not an exhaustive list): 1) freedom is concrete, not merely abstract; 2) freedom is inextricably linked with selfhood; 3) freedom is actualized in repetition; 4) freedom is closely related to anxiety; 5) freedom is grounded in God. Examining these parallels between freedom and possibility will prove beneficial when considering the ways in which possibility drives selfhood in Kierkegaard’s stages of existence; it also builds on the previous chapter’s analysis of possibility as a metaphysical theme woven throughout Kierkegaard’s authorship. If I am right, in many cases, when Kierkegaard describes the significance of freedom, he is also (indirectly) advocating for the significance of possibility.

To that end, the first point to be made is that Kierkegaard distinguishes between “radical free will” (*liberum arbitrium*) and “liberation (*libertas*).”²⁴⁷ The former is a false freedom, or in Kierkegaard’s words, a “chimera.”²⁴⁸ Such ‘freedom’ doesn’t actually exist. Kierkegaard proclaims that “*Liberum arbitrium*, which can equally well choose the good or the evil, is basically an abrogation of the concept of freedom and a despair of any explanation of it.”²⁴⁹ In

²⁴⁵ *EO* 2, p. 175/*SKS* 3, p. 171.

²⁴⁶ This has been admirably covered by many commentators, including Come.

²⁴⁷ Pojman, p. 49. Pojman articulates the former as “the freedom of Buridan’s Ass who starves to death because he cannot decide between two equidistant bundles of hay.” (Ibid) The term *liberum arbitrium*, according to the Hongs, refers to a “freedom of indifference or the ability of the will to choose independently of antecedent factors.” (*CA*, p. 236, note 58.)

²⁴⁸ *JP* 1241/*Pap* IV C 39, *n.d.*, 1842-43.

²⁴⁹ *JP* 1249/*Pap* V B 56:2, *n.d.*, 1844. See also *JP* 1260/*Pap* X 2 A 243, *n.d.*, 1849 and *CA*, p. 49/*SKS* 4, p. 354. Note the similarity between the descriptions of ‘absolute’ freedom as *liberum arbitrium* and the ‘absolute’ possibility (see

other words, to classify my freedom according to my ability to, say, slap the face of everyone I meet (I *could* do it, theoretically, therefore I have the freedom to do it) is for Kierkegaard to entirely corrupt the concept of freedom. It is pointless to strive after the sort of freedom that would entail being able to do absolutely *anything*. Not only is such ‘absolute’ freedom impossible in the final analysis, but it entirely misses the point of having freedom in the first place: freedom is the channel by which we make meaningful existential decisions. This leads to the first correlation between freedom and possibility: the concrete character of freedom.

Abstract and Concrete Freedom

Kierkegaardian freedom, then, is not mere abstract freedom. Abstract freedom includes the aforementioned *liberum arbitrium*, but not only this. Any definition of freedom depending primarily on universal principles that remain divorced from actual lived experience is viewed with suspicion, if not outright rejected. The freedom to decide meaningfully—as opposed to the freedom to simply act in a bio-mechanical sense—is what concerns Kierkegaard. Existential freedom, then, properly understood, must correspond to a specific type of possibility.

Haufniensis states, “[F]reedom’s possibility is not the ability to choose the good or the evil...

The possibility is to *be able*.”²⁵⁰ This statement echoes the description of *liberum arbitrium* in his journals.²⁵¹ But the context also makes clear that we are dealing here with two levels of

possibility. Haufniensis has just asserted that the human being presents itself as a contradiction, and “like every contradiction it is also a task, the history of which begins at that same

chapter one) that is rejected by Kierkegaard as a genuine category of possibility.

²⁵⁰ CA, p. 49/SKS 4, p. 354, emphasis in original. The Danish is *at kunne*. Kierkegaard intends this to be understood as that which a person can do according to their existential freedom. In chapter three I will consider whether, and if so how, Kierkegaard’s multilayered understanding of freedom applies to God.

²⁵¹ JP 1249/Pap V B 56:2, *n.d.*, 1844.

moment.”²⁵² In other words, the contradiction inherent within abstract freedom (its impossibility) leads to the emergence of concrete freedom as a task for that person.²⁵³

I submit that freedom, as an abstract category, is broadly related to what I have called relative metaphysical possibility. But freedom, in actuality, is akin to existential or ethical possibility. Moreover, the introduction of actual or concrete freedom brings about the movement from the first type of possibility to the second type. As Kierkegaard states explicitly in his journals: “Good and evil exist nowhere outside freedom, since this very distinction comes into existence through freedom.”²⁵⁴ Freedom, it seems, serves as the element by which possibility shifts from being relative—either in a physical or epistemic sense—to the more specific concrete category of existential possibility. Concrete freedom, moreover, is not arbitrary; it always has a history, that is, a context in which the free decision has its meaning, and this makes existential freedom a fundamentally ethico-religious concept.²⁵⁵

This points to a responsibility within existential freedom. For a choice to really count as free, it must be a responsible choice, one that has been made for the right reasons.²⁵⁶ Some decisions, in spite of being reflective, are not really meaningful, and thus not really free. For instance, if one decided to utterly commit oneself to doing evil, according to Kierkegaard, that person would not truly be free, in spite of their ‘free decision’: “freedom cannot be regarded

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Regarding this kind of freedom, Kierkegaard states: “What Augustine says of true freedom (distinguished from freedom of choice) is very true and very much a part of experience—namely, that a person has the most lively sense of freedom when with completely decisive determination he impresses upon his action the inner necessity which excludes the thought of another possibility. Then freedom of choice or the ‘agony’ of choice comes to an end.” (*JP* 1269/*Pap X* 4 A 177, *n.d.*, 1851.)

²⁵⁴ Ibid. In Pojman’s words: “Freedom is not so much *what* we do, as the subjective *how* with which we do it.” (Pojman, p. 49, emphasis in original.)

²⁵⁵ *JP* 1268/*Pap X* 4 A 175, *n.d.*, 1851.

²⁵⁶ Here we see the Hegelian influence on Kierkegaard’s conception of freedom: Kierkegaard accepts Hegel’s premise that an action chosen for any reason other than for the sake of freedom itself is not truly free. (See Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* [A. V. Miller, Translator]. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, pp. 356-62.) But Kierkegaard rejects the related claim that true freedom is necessitated by the movement of absolute spirit. On Kierkegaard’s view, this results in the annihilation of freedom.

indiscriminately as a capacity for good and for evil, for then evil is really also a good. Nor can one say that the basis of evil is the misuse of the will, for the very misuse of the will is precisely the evil.”²⁵⁷ Good and evil, as noted above, come into being with concrete freedom. Abstract freedom, on the other hand, leads to the collapsing of all ethical categories, such that responsibility becomes meaningless. For if evil is good, then there are no responsible decisions. Evil decisions ultimately serve to limit freedom and negate possibilities.

In this sense, Kierkegaard’s view of freedom is more like Kant’s than Sartre’s.²⁵⁸ Sartre (at least the early Sartre of *Being and Nothingness*) argued that, because of the incommensurability between all ethical decisions, there can be no objectively grounded standpoint from which one may establish the rational basis of a free ethical decision.²⁵⁹ Thus, Sartre is left with unbridled subjective freedom, something that Kierkegaard rejects due to its abstraction. These are all examples of a loss of freedom, because they reveal an inability to make meaningful decisions, which is the hallmark of true freedom. Abstract freedom, no matter what form it takes, cannot avoid drowning beneath the turbulent waves of arbitrary options.

Kierkegaardian existential possibility is likewise primarily concerned with meaningful choices, as opposed to mere options. Possibility, in a broad sense, simply refers to the myriad abstract alternatives available to the person. The sphere of contingent possibilities contains not only those related to human freedom, but also epistemic possibilities—what it is possible for us

²⁵⁷ JP 1262/Pap X 2 A 438, *n.d.*, 1850.

²⁵⁸ See Thomas E. Hill, Jr., “Kantian autonomy and contemporary ideas of autonomy.” *Kant on Moral Autonomy* (Oliver Sensen, Editor). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 22: “Sartre apparently accepted Kant’s idea of negative freedom and his critique of all previous moral theories but rejected Kant’s claims that a ‘lawless’ free will is impossible and that a free will must be subject to universal rational principles.” Kierkegaard, for his part, replaces universal rationality with the individual response to a divine imperative. This does *not*, however, necessarily equate to ‘divine command theory’.

²⁵⁹ There is some debate over whether Sartre finally accepted at least some rational basis for responsible decisions. Perhaps his most well-known example is the young man trying to decide between becoming a soldier and caring for his ailing mother. (See Jean-Paul Sartre. “Existentialism is a Humanism.” *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* [Walter Kaufmann, Editor]. New York: Penguin Group, 1975, pp. 345-368.)

to know—as well as the speculative possibilities presented in rational thought. Speculative possibilities are not actual, and are accordingly relegated to the sphere of abstract freedom. The same is true of epistemic possibilities, since they are objects of thought. Recall also that Climacus rejects any attempt to assimilate necessity and freedom. However, since an existing actuality cannot also be an existing possibility, those already determined circumstances are no longer possibilities at all, but are simply actualities. Thus, only existential possibilities are related to genuine concrete freedom.

Free decisions actually change things in the world. For instance, it is simply a fact that I exist in a world where the chair I am now sitting on also exists. There is no way for me to ‘unmake’ this world, unless I claim to be a radical skeptic or a solipsist (both of which are generally thought to be incoherent positions). But I can freely choose possibilities that will alter this world, even to the point of eliminating the chair entirely.²⁶⁰ However, at no point do my free decisions to actualize new possibilities nullify the conceptual actuality that was, namely, the world in which the chair existed. And yet, the past is not necessitated, since the past—that is, this world which is now changed—never had to be the case, because there is no absolute necessity driving the whole of reality.

We must remember that Kierkegaard is primarily concerned with human freedom; he does not, for instance, spend much time theorizing about any innate metaphysical freedom operating throughout the universe, even though his ideas may resonate with such a notion. But we are able to discern some underlying metaphysical assumptions that motivate Kierkegaard. Like Kant, whose vision of freedom was ultimately limited by the rational structure of reality, Kierkegaard recognizes that the limits to human freedom are held in place by certain structural

²⁶⁰ I leave aside questions as to whether or not, or at what point, a thing ceases to exist. Presumably, burning the chair to ashes, for instance, would mean that the chair no longer exists.

features of the world.²⁶¹ However, contra Kant, Kierkegaard does not assimilate human freedom into human rationality.²⁶² While ethical decisions do outstrip the deterministic features of the world, they do not, in the end, furnish the greatly desired rule that both Kant and Hegel sought: a principle by which all human freedom may be rationally resolved, either in the edifices of practical reason or by discerning the principle through pure logic.²⁶³ Such a principle would, in Kierkegaard's judgment, ultimately render freedom meaningless, since it would reduce all decisions to predetermined movements within a system of reason. How, then, does Kierkegaardian freedom navigate between the Kantian/Hegelian Scylla and the Sartrean Charybdis? This is a question to which I will return.²⁶⁴

²⁶¹ See Paul Guyer. "Introduction: The Starry Heavens and the Moral Law." *The Cambridge Companion to Kant and Modern Philosophy* (Paul Guyer, Editor). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 2.

²⁶² Guyer suggests that, at least in *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant requires that freedom is grounded in the rationality of the moral law, which will be recognized by any genuinely rational agent. In this way, freedom is determined to operate within the limits of rationality. (Guyer, p. 16ff.) The circularity of this argument—that we possess a faculty of reason based on the rationality of the world, which in turn depends on a faculty of reason to ascertain the world's rationality—was recognized by Kant, who set out to correct it in *Critique of Practical Reason*. There he attempts to show that free will must exist precisely because we recognize the existence of a moral law. (Ibid, p. 19.) Kant sees the power of our freedom as unlimited because the choice to follow the moral law is always incumbent upon any rational person, and because of this we have the freedom to choose morally, no matter how many causal determinants may appear as impediments. This view is reflected in the 'reciprocity thesis' put forward by both Kant and Hegel, which argues that in order for a self to willingly obey the moral law it must be free. Therefore freedom must be rationally posited if there is to be morality. However, Guyer continues, "we have no reason to believe that we can approach purity of will in our terrestrial life spans alone, or that our virtue will be accompanied with proportionate happiness by natural mechanisms alone. We must thus postulate, although always as a matter of practical presupposition and never as theoretical doctrine, that our souls can reach purity in immortality and that there is a God to redress the natural disproportion between virtue and happiness." (Ibid, p. 20.) In other words, we rationally deduce eternal life and God, but we cannot treat these as real truths, since reason does not allow it. Indeed, for Kant, if we were to do so, we would end up compromising the moral integrity necessary for a genuinely free will, because our decisions would not be based on the moral law itself but on some other factor that is not based in reason.

²⁶³ Hegel describes freedom's necessity dialectically: "In the absolute method, the concept *maintains* itself in its otherness... The highest and most intense point is the *pure personality* that, solely by virtue of the absolute dialectic which is its nature, equally embraces and holds *everything within itself*, for it makes itself into the supremely free – the simplicity which is the first immediacy and universality." (*SL*, p. 750, emphasis in original.)

²⁶⁴ See p. 141, footnote 422.

Freedom and Selfhood

The preceding account of concrete freedom may seem to be at odds with my second correlation: freedom, like possibility, is closely tied to selfhood. Indeed, both Judge William and Anti-Climacus—pseudonyms representing Kierkegaard’s earlier and later work, respectively—explicitly state that the self *is* freedom. But if the self is freedom, and (as is commonly thought) selfhood is best understood in rational terms, how can freedom be understood in anything other than rational terms? The answer is that the self is *not* best understood rationally, but existentially.²⁶⁵ In order to understand what Kierkegaard has in mind, I must briefly outline his conception of the self, before examining the self’s relation to freedom and possibility.

In *Either/Or*, Judge William describes both choices and their contents in terms of selfhood, and concludes that the self is freedom:

“[W]hat is it, then, that I choose—is it this or that? No... I choose the absolute, and what is the absolute? It is myself in my eternal validity. Something other than myself I can never choose as the absolute... But what is this self of mine? ...my answer is this: It is the most abstract of all, and yet in itself is also the most concrete of all—it is freedom.”²⁶⁶

Let’s unpack this excerpt. First, choosing something, according to William, is not essentially to choose that particular thing, but is rather to choose oneself, that is, to choose *how I will be in the world*. The thing chosen is not chosen for its own sake, but for the sake of the one who chooses it. Ergo, whenever I choose something, I am choosing myself. To choose myself ‘in my eternal validity’ is to live in light of the reality that, in every decision, I am choosing myself. Remember that free decisions are ethical decisions. But ethics would be meaningless if there was no prior recognition that I am a person who has ethical responsibilities, and this recognition can only

²⁶⁵ For more on Kierkegaard’s view of selfhood, see chapter four.

²⁶⁶ *EO* 2, p. 214/*SKS* 3, p. 205.

happen if and when I decide to accept myself in that capacity.²⁶⁷

Note also that William describes the self as being both the ‘most abstract’ and the ‘most concrete’ of things. What does he mean by this? ‘Abstract’ refers to the objective self, understood primarily in rational terms. The objective or rational self is abstract inasmuch as it orients everything in the world, including itself, as objects to be understood through reason. This involves abstracting the thing under consideration so that it becomes nothing more than a set of properties that can be verified systematically, until a judgment can be made that the thing is what it has been purported to be. Epistemologically, to know what a thing is typically means having beliefs about that thing, which can be justified to such an extent that truth is admitted for those beliefs.²⁶⁸ The objective self attempts this with everything it encounters, including itself. In this way, the objective self becomes less concerned with things *as they actually may be*, and more concerned with things as they are represented by reason. For instance, the tree that I encounter objectively becomes a collection of properties—shape, height, texture, color—that provide an accurate (objective) account of what the tree is. But I can also encounter the tree subjectively, as ‘this tree’, meaning that I do not concern myself with the properties of the tree, but whatever it is that presents itself to me in my particular context. Here I am not primarily concerned with objective assessment, but with subjective interaction and affectation.

How, then, does the self encounter itself? At one level, it is encountered as a thing, an object (a body with a brain that includes neurons firing the electro-chemical signals that enable it to function). But it is also encountered as a subject; that is to say, a particular self with conscious awareness of its own existence, and the desire to actualize and modify various aspects of that

²⁶⁷ Of course, a person may be held accountable for their actions even if they claim to have not recognized their fundamental ethical responsibility. That claim is usually rejected because we take for granted that every rational human being does recognize this responsibility.

²⁶⁸ This definition is generic and must be bolstered to defend against Gettier Cases, etc.

existence. With regard to itself, a self often finds no apparent distance between the objective and the subjective; they are both present in consciousness. That is, when I think, I am always thinking about something—even if that something is myself—but likewise it is always *I* who am doing the thinking. Like Descartes, Kierkegaard recognizes that there is nothing more concrete, more real to me, than myself. This is not immediately ascertainable by objective reason, but it is an immediate reality for me. According to Kierkegaard, in consciousness (that is, self-consciousness) both immediacy and distance, subjectivity and objectivity, merge; self-consciousness is a “contradiction” precisely because of this synthesis. This contradiction forms the self, though the self is not simply the contradiction.²⁶⁹

Thus, the self is at once the most abstract and the most concrete of things. However, this alone does not explain freedom. If Kierkegaard were a strict Kantian, he would rely upon an axiomatic account of freedom grounded in reason. Freedom, for Kant, is genuine when it exhibits an underlying rational principle. Kant often used the analogy of freedom as the ‘keystone’ to the ‘vault’ of reason.²⁷⁰ But Kierkegaard does not think this account is sufficient. Why? The answer is that in order for freedom to exist, the objective and subjective aspects of selfhood must be held together in a relation of tension that stretches both to their limits, but without breaking. This is not a relation where one pole can be added on to the other as a supplement. Rather, both poles must be present, revealing the contradiction. William has already

²⁶⁹ *JC*, p. 168/*SKS* 15, p. 55. In this unpublished work, consciousness is described as the result of the relation between the immediate, or real, and the ideal, described in terms of language or speculation. When the real and the ideal merge, their relation gives rise to a contradiction. This contradiction is manifest in consciousness. In other words, to be a conscious self is to be at once both real and ideal. But this is just the first step. Kierkegaard tells us that ‘reflection’, the state of consciousness just described, is “the *possibility of the relation*; consciousness is *the relation, the first form of which is contradiction*.” (*JC*, p. 169/*SKS* 15, p. 56.) Although this seems to be a fairly Hegelian rendering of consciousness, Kierkegaard rejects Hegel’s account of the final consummation of selfhood that takes place as the real and the ideal merge such that all contradictions are finally resolved. For Kierkegaard, this is tantamount to saying that the real is assimilated into the ideal, since all contradictions are finally resolved by means of the speculative logic of the system.

²⁷⁰ Dieter Henrich, *Between Kant and Hegel: Lectures on German Idealism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003, p. 54.

alluded indirectly to this in his account of the free decision as absolute. Said differently, selfhood requires a dialectic of freedom.

Anti-Climacus also describes freedom as dialectical; however, he uses the terms ‘possibility’ and ‘necessity’ instead of ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’.²⁷¹ Freedom stems from possibility and necessity, as the fruit of their dialectical tension. In both cases, a synthesis must be in place for selfhood to exist. However, the self is *not* the synthesis, any more than consciousness is merely the contradiction in *Johannes Climacus*.²⁷² Rather, the synthesis is a necessary, but not sufficient, component of selfhood. The dialectic is inaccessible to objective reason, since objective reason is incapable of forming the dialectic on its own. To put it in ethical terms, Kantian imperatives can never generate the conditions for the genuinely subjective ethics of selfhood. The ‘absolute’ decision, the decision to choose to be oneself, cannot simply be made on the basis of reason; there is no miraculous moment when I know that the conditions are such that it is now ‘reasonable enough’ for me to choose myself absolutely.²⁷³ It is a leap that one either does or does not make, and, in the leap, freedom and selfhood are established, even as the dialectic itself always already manifests freedom.

This dialectic of objectivity and subjectivity in selfhood contains strong Hegelian overtones. In fact, Judge William seems closer to Hegel than to Kierkegaard. Having recognized the need to choose oneself absolutely, he then explains that when a person “has grasped himself in his eternal validity, this overwhelms him with all its fullness.”²⁷⁴ This is the self that remains

²⁷¹ *SUD*, p. 29/*SKS* 11, p. 145. Whether this linguistic shift is problematic or not is a question that I must unfortunately set aside.

²⁷² *JC*, p. 168/See *SKS* 15, p. 55.

²⁷³ While the epistemic threshold for decision-making need not be set at an impossibly high level, there remains the dilemma of attempting to establish a rational ground for the absolute decision of choosing oneself; probabilistic accounts (Bayesian or otherwise) presumably fail to resolve the problem because they assume a quantitatively measurable framework which depends upon a prior assumption that the category under consideration is quantitatively analyzable.

²⁷⁴ *EO* 2, p. 231/*SKS* 3, p. 221.

unable to move beyond the abstract, so to speak. A paralyzing effect results from the fact that the person “has regarded himself within the category of necessity... he has not seen himself in his freedom, has not chosen himself in freedom.”²⁷⁵ In other words, despite recognizing the free decision that is the self-choice, the paralyzed self ‘falls’ into the abyss of possibility manifested in the recognition of freedom. To choose oneself in freedom means that one must be “in motion;” that is, one recognizes the responsibility of ethical selfhood and commits oneself to it, knowing that it will require a never-ending commitment.²⁷⁶

Why such a requirement? Because the decision to choose oneself in freedom—to choose ethically, according to one’s possibility—is not a single action. It is an absolute decision to be responsible, and once that decision has been made, it must be constantly upheld: “he can remain in his freedom only by continually realizing [*realisere*] it.”²⁷⁷ Otherwise, the person slips back into a state of unfreedom. Anti-Climacus echoes this point as well: “Possibility and necessity are equally essential to becoming (and the self has the task of becoming itself in freedom).”²⁷⁸ Come helpfully suggests that “‘actuality’ is *enacted* freedom;” that freedom, in other words, takes place in the relation between possibility (infinitude) and necessity (finitude) such that actuality is the result. So, “I am free not just to *be* free as a thing in itself, or to be free *from* all delimitation and self-definition, but to be free *for* becoming myself in actuality.”²⁷⁹ The mere presence of possibility is not sufficient for selfhood. The task is a process, not a once-and-for-all event.

But how does one go about continually choosing oneself in freedom? Is it purely an act of will? Is it the result of external influences? William, for his part, reverts to a conception of freedom that remains dependent on a universal concept:

²⁷⁵ *EO* 2, p. 232/*SKS* 3, p. 222.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁸ *SUD*, p. 35/*SKS* 11, p. 151.

²⁷⁹ Come, *Kierkegaard as Humanist*, p. 175, emphasis in original.

“The ethical is the universal and thus the abstract... when the ethical becomes more concrete, it crosses over into the category of morals... But the ethical is still abstract and cannot be fully actualized because it lies outside the individual. Not until the individual himself is the universal, not until then can the ethical be actualized. This is the secret that lies in the conscience; this is the secret the individual life has with itself—that simultaneously it is an individual life and also the universal.”²⁸⁰

In other words, although ethical principles are, in themselves, abstract, they become more concrete by virtue of their relation to actual persons. The ethical becomes truly actual, according to William, at the moment of self-realization; that is, when the self chooses itself absolutely. In this way, the self chooses to be ethical, and in so doing it actualizes in its particularity the ethical absolute, manifesting the internal principle that is always present in the abstract form of the idea. The person is precisely a self when she becomes united with the universal ethical principle. At the same time, the person realizes what has been true all along; namely, that she has been striving for unity with the universal. We have an example of Hegelian unity-in-difference, and this takes place in the self “according to its possibility.”²⁸¹ Indeed, William states, “to transform [myself] into the universal human being is possible only if I already have it within myself *kata dunamin* [potentially]. In other words, the universal can very well continue in and with the specific without consuming it.”²⁸²

Once I have “ethically chosen and found” myself, my selfhood is recognized as “a task,” because it requires the constant decision to choose myself as ‘this person’.²⁸³ I am a person “who is subject to these external influences, who is influenced in one direction thus and in another thus.”²⁸⁴ In other words, there are actualities about myself and the world that I cannot undo or overcome. At the same time, my possibilities are effectively endless, in the sense that I can

²⁸⁰ *EO*, 2, p. 255/*SKS* 3, p. 243-44.

²⁸¹ *EO*, 2, p. 256/*SKS* 3, p. 244.

²⁸² *EO*, 2, p. 261/*SKS* 3, p. 249.

²⁸³ *EO*, 2, p. 262/*SKS* 3, p. 250.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

constantly change myself and the world in a multitude of ways through my free decisions. For William, freedom, being the dialectical relation between the abstract and concrete poles of existence, is a kind of internal principle brought to bear upon actions that, when actualized—that is, when the self chooses itself absolutely—can be seen for what it has always been: the universal truth waiting to be revealed in the free decisions of persons.²⁸⁵

This, however, clashes with the tension of the dialectic itself, since it suggests a latent universal property of freedom that, once activated, begins the movement of the absolute in the person—the becoming of the self. Kierkegaard insists that the dialectic of freedom must be absolutely maintained, in order to be considered genuine freedom. As the syntheses of the self must be present, the dialectic of freedom must be present as well.²⁸⁶ If we accept William’s account, freedom’s tension seems relaxed; rather than a dialectic that fully extends contradictory objective and subjective elements, we have a freedom that is already essentially objective but waiting for the subjective to actualize it. This looks less like dialectical tension, and more like an external principle guiding the rational person to selfhood.

In Hegelian terms, it looks as though the possibility of freedom has been established as a dialectic by the necessity of the logic. But this is not Kierkegaard’s view; he takes freedom to be inexplicable according to reason, and his disapproval of Kantian/Hegelian accounts of freedom stems from his belief that such accounts invariably attempt to explain freedom solely using rational principles. Kierkegaard thinks this is a mistake. Any universal principle short-circuits the

²⁸⁵ As William puts it, “Not until I absolutely choose myself do I absolutely infinitize myself, because I myself *am* the absolute, because only I myself can choose absolutely; and this absolute choice of myself is my freedom, and only when I have absolutely chosen myself have I posited an absolute difference: namely, the difference between good and evil.” (*EO*, 2, p. 223-24/*SKS* 3, p. 214.)

²⁸⁶ “The self is *κατὰ δύναμιν* [potentially] just as possible as it is necessary; for it is indeed itself, but it has the task of becoming itself. Insofar as it is itself, it is the necessary, and insofar as it has the task of becoming itself, it is a possibility.” (*SUD*, p. 35/*SKS* 11, p. 151.) To claim that a universal principle is the ground for the self reduces one pole of this relation—possibility—to nothing more than a choice between truth and falsehood that has already privileged the principle as truth. Hence, freedom becomes a given: the free person will choose the universal principle. But this reduces freedom to nothing more than a placeholder for the rational decision.

dialectic by offering a rational ground that guarantees the outcome of freedom. And a rationally guaranteed outcome is precisely *not* free.²⁸⁷

The view of ethical selfhood developed by Judge William also differs from those put forward by later pseudonyms. Both Climacus and Anti-Climacus, for instance, seem to reject the notion that the self is chosen absolutely in freedom; rather, the self chooses itself in freedom only to realize that its choice must be sustained by virtue of another source.²⁸⁸ It is not that the self fails to be ‘free’, but rather that freedom does not consist in the kind of absolute principle of rational choice that the Judge hopes to find in a systematic account like Kant’s or Hegel’s. Moreover, the synthesis of the self, says Anti-Climacus, is a relation “that, even though it is derived, relates itself to itself, which is freedom.”²⁸⁹ Freedom is that the self’s relation is infinitely sustained, not in the relation’s being subsumed or mediated by a universal principle that gives the relation its freedom by virtue of providing the conditions in which freedom may take place.

Returning, then, to the concern raised at the start of this section: does Kierkegaard’s description of selfhood not oppose his assertion that freedom is concrete rather than merely abstract? I submit that the key word in the previous sentence is ‘merely’. There *is* an abstract component to freedom, but this cannot be claimed as genuine existential freedom, any more than absolute possibility can be claimed as genuine existential possibility. Freedom has a metaphysical source, but that source does not determine the outcome of our freedom, since that

²⁸⁷ This assertion can be questioned: why must a rationally guaranteed outcome eliminate freedom? Can there not be determination and freedom? Here, arguments might be made similar to those that attempt to reconcile God’s foreknowledge with human free will. If these arguments succeed, then perhaps one could say that Kierkegaard’s view is incorrect. However, Kierkegaard would likely concede that a caveat is appropriate in the case of God’s knowledge; it is rationality as a feature of the world, which certain Hegelians may imbue with a power of determination, to which Kierkegaard is opposed and against which he promotes the power of freedom.

²⁸⁸ In the *Fragments*, this source is ultimately an “absolutely freely acting cause;” in *Sickness* it is the “ground” in which the self is “established.” (*PF*, p. 75-76/*SKS* 4, p. 275-76; *SUD*, p. 13ff/*SKS* 11, p. 129ff.)

²⁸⁹ *SUD*, p. 29/*SKS* 11, p. 145.

would effectively eliminate our freedom. It seems clear that Kierkegaard does *not* operate with a conception of freedom that is altogether unconditioned; and yet, we must ask what the relation is between the conditions of freedom and freedom itself. Is freedom a necessary feature in a dialectical system, or does freedom itself depend upon a ground that provides it with the infinite movement necessary for the sustained dialectic? If so, what is that ground? The issue here is whether one thinks that the conditions themselves necessitate the event of freedom or, rather, that the conditions are a necessary, but not sufficient, requirement for freedom. To put it differently: does the relation sustain itself, or must it be sustained by another?²⁹⁰

Freedom, Possibility, and Repetition

Discussion of freedom's dialectical movement, and the continual decision(s) entailed by that movement, leads to a third correlation between freedom and possibility: the concept of 'repetition'. As Niels Eriksen points out, there are significant connections between repetition and possibility for Kierkegaard.²⁹¹ I will examine these shortly. But, first, how does Kierkegaard depict repetition? An initial answer is found in the pseudonymous work bearing that singular title. There, in a series of letters between himself and an unnamed 'young man', the author, Constantin Constantius, attempts to discover whether repetition is actually feasible or not. Constantius explains that repetition is the inverse of Platonic 'recollection'.²⁹² Whereas recollection is the attempt to acquire knowledge by looking backward (i.e., to what is already

²⁹⁰ One could perhaps argue that freedom is maintained in a purely *negative* form; that is, freedom is the possibility of rejecting the moral imperative, and this possibility is always available to the person. But Kierkegaard views freedom, possibility, and selfhood in *positive* as well as negative terms, and Anti-Climacus explicitly denies that the negative dialectic is sufficient to sustain the syntheses of spirit such that selfhood properly emerges. See *SUD*, p. 13/SKS 11, p. 129.

²⁹¹ Niels Nymann Eriksen. *Kierkegaard's Category of Repetition: A Reconstruction*. Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 2000.

²⁹² *R*, p. 131/SKS 4, p. 9. See also *PF*, p. 9/SKS 4, p. 218. Cf. Plato's *Meno*, section 80.

implicitly known), repetition is the activity of acquiring knowledge, meaning, and selfhood by looking forward. In other words, the theory of recollection, according to Kierkegaard, is inadequate.

Repetition is a way of being that entails freedom: it emphasizes the truth to be discovered when a person lives into their future rather than attempting to recall their past.²⁹³ Repetition is more than merely gaining knowledge; it is the means by which one gains selfhood. Repetition is necessary for selfhood and therefore constitutive of selfhood's possibility. Unlike many ordinary possibilities, which (when actualized) do not affect any fundamental change in the actualizer,²⁹⁴ the existential possibilities with which Kierkegaard is primarily concerned are those that fundamentally change the person. There is a movement from possibility to actuality such that something new and previously non-existent (a 'becoming') happens to *me*. Such possibilities, says Eriksen, "[mark] a moment of discontinuity with the past, a new beginning."²⁹⁵ Metaphysically, repetition helps to clarify a pluralist ontology that describes existence in terms of both being and non-being. Repetition thus has the potential to be a category in which the transitions from non-being to being, from possibility to actuality, that cannot be explained using traditional philosophical categories may be maintained.

Put more directly, repetition is the event of freedom operating in existential possibility. In order for there to be repetition, there must first be the possibility of difference; that is, a framework is needed within which multiple experiences may be related to each other as similar or dissimilar. However, repetition cannot happen in ideality; that is, purely in the mode of

²⁹³ Constantius insists that repetition belongs in the "sphere of freedom." (*R*, p. 308/*Pap IV B 112, n.d.*, 1843-44.)

²⁹⁴ Think, for example, of my actualizing the possibility that I might stop typing for a minute and drink a glass of water. If I do so, I have actualized a possibility and eliminated all other possibilities in that particular 'strand' of activity, but by itself the decision presumably has little, if any, impact on me and my selfhood.

²⁹⁵ Eriksen, p. 125. Eriksen missteps, however, when he says that such "pathos-filled" transitions are not actualizations of possibility, but rather "[come] about through the *annihilation of possibility*." (Ibid, emphasis in original) This seems erroneous, since Kierkegaard makes clear that such a bifurcation is unnecessary.

speculative thought. There must be an actual change in which repetition takes place. Repetition is the event wherein the ideal and actual meet.²⁹⁶ Is it enough to say that repetition signifies a fundamental existential commitment? Clare Carlisle, for instance, posits that repetition signifies a “form of consciousness, suggestive of a particular plane of motion,” wherein truth is realized for “the subjectivity of the existing individual.”²⁹⁷ On this view, repetition may be found in a passionate, subjective fidelity to an absolute way of life, such as is found in the Christian’s devotion to the way of Christ. But, although I appreciate Carlisle’s insight, a subjective commitment with no actual content seems to evoke repetition only in a limited sense. Surely any Christian commitment is lacking something vital if Christ never existed. Genuine repetition thus requires a proper relation to its object.

The fact that God’s existence is needed for a comprehensive account of repetition is suggested by the young man’s appeals to the story of Job throughout *Repetition*, as well as Constantius’s assertion that without God-willed repetition, the world would not have been created.²⁹⁸ Job’s repetition, of course, is only possible due to divine intervention. The implication is that there is human repetition and divine repetition, and without the latter, the former is forever at risk of being a fiction. This seems to be in line with Kierkegaard’s general metaphysical picture. Indeed, like freedom and possibility, repetition is a multilayered concept. Kierkegaard posits three kinds of repetition that map onto three kinds of freedom.²⁹⁹ This is seen in the essay titled “A Little Contribution by Constantin Constantius Author of *Repetition*.”³⁰⁰ In that treatise,

²⁹⁶ *JC*, p. 171/*SKS* 15, p. 58. Kierkegaard also insists that Hegelian mediation fails to accomplish this meeting.

²⁹⁷ Carlisle, p. 70, 72. She says further: “As an inward, intensifying movement, repetition expresses the spiritual power of a singular thing. To put it another way, the measure of a being’s significance is its power to repeat itself, to renew itself, to project itself forward, to actualize itself again.” (Carlisle, p. 76)

²⁹⁸ *R*, p. 133/*SKS* 4, p. 10.

²⁹⁹ In his journals (*JP* 3793/*Pap* IV A 156, *n.d.*, 1843), Kierkegaard distinguishes between three different types of repetition, and states that the reason Constantius cannot “proceed further” is because repetition “is and remains a religious category.” (*JP* 3794/*Pap* IV A 169, *n.d.*, 1844.)

³⁰⁰ *R*, p. 299ff/*Pap* IV B 112, *n.d.*, 1843-44.

written as a rejoinder to J. R. Heiberg's somewhat critical review of *Repetition*, Constantius plainly states that "freedom passes through several stages in order to attain itself."³⁰¹

Accordingly, he puts forward a multidimensional account of freedom and repetition.

In the first stage, freedom is "qualified as desire [*Lyst*] or as being in desire."³⁰² Desire, in whatever form it comes, is fundamentally interested in obtaining the object of that desire.

Initially, freedom recognizes its capacity to pursue ends for itself, which involves positing those ends as objective goals.³⁰³ Thus freedom of desire 'fears' repetition, since repetition does not obtain its object by means of recollecting the truth about the object already implicit within oneself. Repetition thus represents an obstacle to desire's obtaining its object. After all, it is easier to grasp an object if it is something to which I already have access. Similarly, it is less problematic to believe something when I already have a substantial amount of background information that supports my beliefs. Repetition posits, however, that the ethico-religious object is not my possession, but that, by virtue of the movement taking place in freedom from possibility to actuality, the object will come into existence for me via the actualization of a reality wherein I have obtained the object. But freedom of desire, founded on objectivity, finds good reasons to question this paradigm. (This is part of the anxiety that will be discussed in the next section.) Accordingly, the need for repetition leads to despair, which is to say, freedom of desire gives up the hope of obtaining its object.³⁰⁴

"Simultaneously," says Constantius, freedom may now appear "in a higher form..."

³⁰¹ *R*, p. 301/*Pap* IV B 112, *n.d.*, 1843-44.

³⁰² *Ibid.* Interestingly, this is also the definition of freedom put forward by some contemporary analytic philosophers. Robert Kane, for instance, states that freedom is often defined as the ability to satisfy "our desires." (Robert Kane. "Contours of the Contemporary Free Will Debate." *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 12.)

³⁰³ Thus, Kierkegaard describes the first type of repetition as the activity that exists "in my consciousness in conception and thought." (*JP* 3793/*Pap* IV A 156, *n.d.*, 1843.) One begins by establishing oneself as a subject over and against objects.

³⁰⁴ *R*, p. 301/*Pap* IV B 112, *n.d.*, 1843-44.

qualified as sagacity.”³⁰⁵ This is the second kind of freedom, and it correlates with a second kind of repetition. Here repetition itself becomes the object, and “freedom’s task in sagacity is continually to gain a new aspect of repetition.”³⁰⁶ But the relation here is still a ‘finite’ one; in other words, it is still an attempt to relate to an object, albeit repetition itself. For instance, a person may attempt to become ethical by relating directly to the ethical concept itself. This objectification is ambiguous and, according to Constantius, leads some to “embellish this standpoint as the highest wisdom.”³⁰⁷ However, repetition, once again, reveals the problem: “namely, repetition of the trickery by which sagacity wants to fool repetition.”³⁰⁸ And, once again, freedom’s objectivity is challenged by the nature of repetition.³⁰⁹

In other words, although freedom attempts to relate to repetition, because the relation is one of abstraction and objectivity, the question of reliability returns. That is, one can ask on what basis the expectation that repetition exists as an object to be grasped is founded. It is as if one attempts to be an honest person by continually keeping their thoughts focused on the ethical principle of honesty. This will soon prove to be insufficient, as there is always the possibility of an exception that may lead one to question the principle. Thus, the principle itself can never *make* one honest tout court. ‘Ought’ does not always imply ‘can’. In this sense, since repetition itself is no more objectively present than any other concept, one faces the dilemma of how to relate to repetition at all, given that recollection, the accessing of truth already possessed, is not an option. Thus, upon further consideration, the freedom of sagacity also leads one to despair about attaining the ethico-religious object.

³⁰⁵ Ibid.

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

³⁰⁷ R, p. 302/Pap IV B 112, *n.d.*, 1843-44.

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

³⁰⁹ Kierkegaard writes, “I presuppose that I am in an original integral state. Now comes the problem of sin, the problem of a second repetition, for now I must return to myself again.” (*JP* 3793/Pap IV A 156, *n.d.*, 1843.)

Now, however, freedom “breaks forth in its highest form, in which it is qualified in relation to itself.”³¹⁰ Here, freedom becomes something different, and so does freedom’s goal; rather than seeking an object for itself and attempting to block any logical interference between itself and its object, at this level “freedom’s supreme interest is precisely to bring about repetition, and its only fear is that variation would have the power to disturb its eternal nature.”³¹¹ Instead of being afraid of repetition, freedom now *seeks* repetition, precisely because it accepts that repetition is the key to its own fulfillment. That is, rather than trying to actually relate properly to an ethical theory, the person chooses to possibly *be* ethical. Thus, Constantius says, “Freedom itself is now the repetition.”³¹² This, according to Kierkegaard, is the “real paradox by which I become the single individual.”³¹³ Repetition here becomes a religious concept, as Jon Stewart explains: “Although humanity cannot revert to the original state of paradise, nevertheless the fact of the original sin is no longer decisive for its fate... Here one has the possibility, thanks to divine grace, of overcoming one’s sinfulness. This is the Christian challenge of the third form of repetition, which is presumably the true and highest form.”³¹⁴

Given that freedom is equated with the self, it seems reasonable to posit that, in this highest form, we have a self that sustains itself by virtue of repetition. The self, in this sense, *is* repetition. But all of this hinges on whether repetition is, in fact, viable. Constantius recognizes that the crucial question is: “*Is repetition possible?*”³¹⁵ So far, we have been presented with an axiomatic account of repetition; we must ask whether that account warrants our acceptance or

³¹⁰ *R*, p. 302/*Pap IV B 112, n.d.*, 1843-44.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*

³¹² *Ibid*, emphasis in original. Constantius notes: “as soon as the individual is viewed in his freedom, the question becomes a different one: Can repetition be realized? It is repetition in this pregnant sense as a task for freedom and as freedom that gives the title to my little book.” (*R*, p. 312-13/*Pap IV B 112, n.d.*, 1843-44.)

³¹³ *JP 3793/Pap IV A 156, n.d.*, 1843.

³¹⁴ Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard’s Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 299 (Cf. *R*, p. 326.). In his final letter to Constantius, the young man in *Repetition* admits that “eternity... is the true repetition.” (*R*, p. 221.)

³¹⁵ *R*, p. 302/*Pap IV B 112, n.d.*, 1843-44, emphasis in original.

not. This is a difficult question, and one that also highlights the relation between freedom and possibility. Kierkegaardian freedom, we have seen, has to do with concrete, responsible decisions; that is to say, freedom has to do with existential possibility. It is the ‘vehicle’ of freedom, then, that constitutes the possibility of selfhood, and that takes place via the ‘engine’ of repetition. Perhaps another helpful metaphor is the following: the possible self is shaped by freedom as stone is shaped by a sculptor, and repetition is the chisel. (Of course, all metaphors eventually break down.)

In any case, if there is no repetition, then the self is not shaped properly, and thus selfhood cannot be achieved. We are left either with natural determination or abstract speculation. Constantius, referring to the distinction between freedom and Hegelian logic, offers the following critique of speculation: “in logic, when possibility, by means of the immanence of thought, has determined itself as actuality, one only disturbs the silent self-inclosure of the logical process by talking about the movement and transition. In the sphere of freedom, however, possibility remains and actuality emerges as a transcendence.”³¹⁶ In logic, possibility (and, therefore, selfhood) never really breaks out of itself; the actual and the possible are both managed objectively and the result, when correctly understood, is always consistent with the speculation. Any ‘disturbance’ is a result of inaccurate or inadequate data, rather than a genuine change.

In the sphere of freedom, however, there is a change or movement in the sense that something really *happens*. In *Johannes Climacus*, Kierkegaard states: “In reality as such, there is no repetition... because reality is only in the moment... In ideality alone there is no repetition, for the idea is and remains the same, and as such it cannot be repeated. When ideality and reality

³¹⁶ R, p. 309-10/*Pap* IV B 112, *n.d.*, 1843-44.

touch each other, then repetition occurs.”³¹⁷ Said differently, at an ontological level, what was possible is now actual. This change is more than merely semantic. We are dealing with something not reducible to the realm of speculation, and it is this metaphysical commitment that makes the concept of repetition necessary for Kierkegaard. Repetition must be present if there is genuine self-responsibility; that is, if there is more to self-becoming than necessitated causal chains or abstract logical constructs.

Stewart agrees that “Constantius intends the notion of repetition to be a more philosophically satisfying response to the problem of motion than Hegelian mediation.”³¹⁸ He explains that, for Constantius, both mediation and repetition are concepts “intended to solve the philosophical problem of motion,” but only repetition, in fact, does.³¹⁹ Constantius argues that there is a difference between the sphere of necessity (which is logic/thinking) and that of freedom (which is existence, one’s individual life).³²⁰ So, says Stewart, “since movement in logic is only a movement of abstract categories, which are homogeneous entities, then this movement is an immanent movement of thought itself. It... is not genuine movement.”³²¹ Unlike mediation, repetition, which takes place in the sphere of freedom, is “the appropriate concept for the sphere of freedom” since, as noted above, it involves the activity of transcendence.³²² What, then, is this transcendence? According to Stewart, the notion is best explained by Haufniensis in *The Concept of Anxiety*. There we are told that the transcendence which brings genuine movement to the sphere of freedom involves in each instance an event that is a new beginning, a ‘leap’ from one

³¹⁷ *JC*, p. 171/*SKS* 15, p. 58.

³¹⁸ Stewart, p. 292.

³¹⁹ Stewart, p. 293. Stewart reminds us that for Hegel “it is through mediation that movement takes place. Individual concepts generate their opposites, and then these pairs of categories are mediated, thus producing new concepts. Thus, being produces its opposite, nothing, and the two opposites are united in a third concept, becoming.” (Ibid.)

³²⁰ *R*, p. 308/*Pap* IV B 112, *n.d.*, 1843-44.

³²¹ Stewart, p. 294. See *R*, p. 186/*SKS* 4, p. 57. As Stewart notes, for Kierkegaard, repetition “bridges the gap between the realms of freedom and necessity, whereas mediation only operates in the one (i.e., in the realm of necessity).” (Stewart, p. 297.)

³²² Ibid.

state of being to another.³²³

This implies Kierkegaard has a view of personhood grounded in the notion that a self is, at each moment, “radically different from the past and that thus the individual is ultimately free to choose himself and his actions ex nihilo at each moment without being predetermined by his past.”³²⁴ Stewart notes that there are problems with such a view. First, it calls into question the continuity of the individual: “it seems to eliminate the very conception of a personal identity over time; what is left over is a schizophrenic individual with no continuity in his biography and self-image.”³²⁵ Additionally, if freedom is radicalized in this way, it becomes “difficult to explain the actual relation between the two terms of the repetition.”³²⁶ Repetition depends on the possibility of repeating, and how can there be repeating if there is no connection between the two moments? The issue, then, is how to identify “the status of the two moments that constitute the repetition,” especially if Kierkegaard claims that the relation between the moments is a kind of transcendence.³²⁷ This seems to short-circuit the idea of repetition altogether.

Stewart offers the following solution: recall that in *Johannes Climacus* Kierkegaard describes the unity of ideality and reality as a contradiction which results in, and is itself, consciousness. Repetition, Kierkegaard says, is found in this unity; it does not happen in either ideality or reality alone. So Stewart asserts that repetition is best interpreted as an ethical action that takes the ideality of the ethical principle and appropriates it in one’s real life. This unity of the ideal and the real involves a transcendent element and also allows repetition to take place.³²⁸

³²³ See *CA*, p. 113/*SKS* 4, p. 415.

³²⁴ Stewart, p. 295.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*

³²⁶ *Ibid.* I assume radical voluntarism for the sake of the argument; I make no claim as to whether Kierkegaard was a free will libertarian or a kind of compatibilist.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*

³²⁸ Stewart, p. 295-96. This is similar, I think, to Carlisle’s account of repetition (p. 101). Stewart relies on the quote above (see footnote 317) for support of his contention that repetition is best interpreted as an ethical movement. In fact, however, as Haufniensis explains in *CA*, Constantius’s reference to transcendence is meant to show that

Stewart concludes that repetition is ‘transcendent’ because the sphere of action transcends the sphere of thought. Repetition “spans the gap” between thought and action, and in this sense it accomplishes what Hegelian mediation cannot.³²⁹ But Stewart admits that the concept of repetition remains unclear, and that the relation between thought and action “remains a paradox and a contradiction.”³³⁰ He also rightly notes that Kierkegaard moves beyond the ethical view to what is ultimately a religious view of repetition.³³¹ And yet he seems unwilling to grant actuality to the religious form of repetition, in spite of his apparent willingness to accept paradoxes in the ethical sphere.

It seems to me that, given the above considerations, Kierkegaard thinks we must move beyond an ethical account of repetition—since the ethical also ends in a contradiction that must be overcome—if selfhood is going to be actualized. Repetition is the religious category by which the self maintains its selfhood, even as it moves beyond itself to become something new. How, then, might we prevent the above dilemma from returning in the religious sphere of repetition? I suggest that the answer to this question will mirror the response given regarding the self’s free movement; that is, can the self be the source of its own fulfillment, or must that be provided by another?

This takes for granted that the self has a telos, and indeed Kierkegaard tends to assert this point axiomatically. Furthermore, he maintains that a telos must be provided by the ‘absolute’ or the ‘eternal’.³³² However, rather than an abstract, conceptual teleology, Kierkegaard’s self-fulfillment is motivated by a God, who, as we will see, is best understood in terms of absolute

repetition is a religious category. (See *CA*, p. 18/*SKS* 4, p. 324.)

³²⁹ Stewart, p. 296.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*

³³¹ Stewart, p. 297.

³³² See, for instance, the description of Abraham in *Fear and Trembling* as one who has placed himself in the paradoxical “absolute relation to the absolute.” (*FT*, p. 56, 62, 70/*SKS* 4, p. 150, 155, 162)

freedom. But this religious repetition is, as Haufniensis notes, a “movement by virtue of the absurd.”³³³ Stewart describes it as “the fundamental and irreconcilable incommensurability between actuality and ideality or particularity and universality, God and man, and so on,” and states that “repetition can be understood as the absolute paradox of Christianity.”³³⁴ Nevertheless, God is the one for whom repetition is indeed possible, even if, from the perspective of human understanding, repetition is a paradox or impossibility. To have faith in this possibility is to enter into the movement of repetition, freedom, and selfhood.

Freedom, Possibility, and Anxiety

The fourth point of contact between freedom and possibility is found in the anxiety of selfhood. Indeed, Kierkegaardian anxiety is primarily understood in terms of freedom, and possibility—at least on Haufniensis’s account—is fundamentally constitutive of the freedom that is tethered to anxiety. This is emphasized in *The Concept of Anxiety*, where Haufniensis declares that “anxiety is freedom’s actuality as the possibility of possibility.”³³⁵ This statement needs a bit of unpacking; like many of Haufniensis’s claims, it contains certain implicit assumptions. I contend that Haufniensis is assuming the prior presence of possibility as a category that, in its abstract form, remains unrelated to selfhood. This is consistent with the relative categories of possibility that are not qualified as existential. Alongside abstract possibility, we find abstract freedom. When possibility is acknowledged by a person, abstract freedom is present. However, because freedom is initially recognized as ‘the possibility of possibility’, this actualization likewise produces anxiety, which is the dialectical component out of which existential freedom

³³³ CA, p. 18/SKS 4, p. 324.

³³⁴ Stewart, p. 300.

³³⁵ CA, p. 42/SKS 4, p. 348.

arises. The awakening of “freedom’s possibility” in the first human being creates anxiety precisely because the human being becomes aware of the dizzying array of possibilities available to the self.³³⁶

This may seem strange; why should the self-conscious recognition of possibility necessarily result in anxiety? It is important here to understand anxiety *not* as a psychological ailment that may manifest itself physically. Haufniensis is speculating about the more general *angst* that is both broadly interpreted as a kind of unease about existence and also closely connected to one’s sense of self. Anxiety is seen as a psychological component present in all self-conscious beings, even if only tacitly or insensibly. Moreover, anxiety is “neither a category of necessity nor a category of freedom; it is entangled freedom... entangled, not by necessity, but in itself.”³³⁷ Said differently, abstract freedom is actualized by the self-conscious awareness of possibility, but as the self has not yet established any relation to its possibilities other than recognizing them as possibilities, this freedom becomes jumbled and caught up in its own web of infinite manifestations. Being entangled in this way implies that freedom has become caught up in itself; there is no empirical or rational means of escape. Freedom is, in spite of its centrality, not sufficient for selfhood. Indeed, “anxiety is the dizziness of freedom, which emerges when... freedom looks down into its own possibility, laying hold of finiteness to support itself. Freedom succumbs in this dizziness.”³³⁸

Kierkegaard classifies selfhood as a kind of potentiality beyond mere matter. The self is, in some sense, an agent positing its own becoming, and to the extent that it is such, there is a quality of the self that is not simply material.³³⁹ Although one recognizes the necessity of

³³⁶ CA, p. 44/SKS 4, p. 350.

³³⁷ CA, p. 49/SKS 4, p. 354.

³³⁸ CA, p. 61/SKS 4, p. 365.

³³⁹ See the discussion in chapter one on Aristotle’s and Kierkegaard’s views of potentiality.

decision-making, one also recognizes that there is no necessary path or pattern to follow; there is an infinite ocean of possibilities in front of the person. This awareness causes the person to become overwhelmed by their own existence, which results in anxiety. In a certain sense, then, anxiety precedes freedom.³⁴⁰ That is, abstract freedom is not yet present while the person is in a state of ‘spiritual’ sleep (that is, prior to self-conscious reflection), but a preconscious form of anxiety arrives in the ‘dreaming’ that manifests itself as a presentiment of the freedom (and subsequent anxiety) that will arrive upon ‘awakening’ to one’s situation.³⁴¹ This is why, initially, the object of anxiety is nothing: “If the object of anxiety is such a something that when viewed essentially, i.e., in the direction of freedom, it signifies something, then we do not have a leap but a quantitative transition that confuses every concept.”³⁴²

In other words, there is no objective content to the anxiety of abstract freedom, because the anxiety is about possibility, which in its basic form, is non-being rather than being. To say otherwise results in a logical regress, since one can always inquire as to the external cause that led to the psychological response. In the case of anxiety, the initial cause is nothing more than the subject-object divide; the content of that divide is irrelevant and to inquire about that content is to make a category mistake. Anxiety and possibility are always already intertwined for the self, since their relation evolves in freedom. It is only in the process of self-awareness that anxiety manifests itself, first as the ‘possibility of possibility’ that actualizes freedom (so that it becomes concrete) and then as the psychological feature of selfhood that finds expression in human existence. Prior to this, freedom and possibility are only conceptual conditions that have no bearing on actual lived experience. Haufniensis also states that a person’s anxiety, initially, is “not anxiety about sin, for as yet the distinction between good and evil is not, because this

³⁴⁰ CA, p. 61/SKS 4, p. 365.

³⁴¹ CA, p. 235, note 46.

³⁴² CA, p. 77/SKS 4, p. 380.

distinction first comes about with the actuality of freedom.”³⁴³ This suggests that there is a dialectic at work in anxiety; it precedes freedom in some sense, and is also brought out and heightened by freedom in another sense.³⁴⁴

It is useful to mention the concept of sin at this point, because it elucidates the way in which anxiety is heightened by freedom. The mention of sin also provides the opportunity to highlight an issue that I will expand upon in later chapters; namely, the way in which existential possibility becomes ‘entangled’ in itself just as freedom does. Indeed, how can it be otherwise, if freedom *is* the sphere of existential possibility? However, there is one major contrast between entangled possibility and sin. Whereas the self’s possibility necessarily becomes entangled in itself, it is not necessary that the self must sin. Indeed, one of the main points in *CA* is precisely that sin is not inevitable. As Haufniensis explains, not only is sin “not a state”—which he defines as “a becoming by necessity,” but it is not necessary, since proposing sin’s necessity amounts to a contradiction.³⁴⁵ The arrival of sin is, as Haufniensis repeatedly states, something that cannot be explained.³⁴⁶ However, anxiety, as the psychological category that “precedes sin,” provides us with an account that “approaches sin as closely as possible” without explaining it.³⁴⁷

This same view is offered in Haufniensis’s account of the good. After (ironically?) saying that ‘the good’ cannot be defined, he then offers the following:

³⁴³ *CA*, p. 52/*SKS* 4, p. 357.

³⁴⁴ The complexity here is often misrepresented. Gregory Beabout, for instance, states that Haufniensis’s ascription of anxiety as ‘freedom’s actuality as the possibility of possibility’ means that “anxiety makes possibility possible and hence makes freedom actual.” (Gregory R. Beabout. *Freedom and Its Misuses: Kierkegaard on Anxiety and Despair*. Milwaukee, Marquette University Press, 1996, p. 47.) But this seems to me to oversimplify the issues at hand.

³⁴⁵ *CA*, p. 15, 21/*SKS* 4, p. 322-23, 329. Haufniensis explains further that sin’s necessity would eliminate the category of anxiety, since there is no need to be anxious about a life that is fated to follow a certain course. (*CA*, p. 49/*SKS* 4, p. 354.) This may be a dubious statement, but the point remains that in as far as sin depends on the freedom of the person to choose otherwise (since without that freedom the person could not be blamed), it is a contradiction to posit that sin must be a necessary feature of the world. For if it is necessary, then the person *must* sin, which is the denial of freedom.

³⁴⁶ *CA*, p. 48, 51/*SKS* 4, p. 353, 356.

³⁴⁷ *CA*, p. 92/*SKS* 4, p. 395.

“The good is freedom. The difference between good and evil is only for freedom and in freedom, and this difference is never *in abstracto* but only *in concreto*... This misunderstanding arises because freedom is changed into something else, into an object of thought. But freedom is never *in abstracto*. If freedom is given a moment to choose between good and evil, a moment when freedom itself is in neither the one or the other, then in that very moment freedom is not freedom, but a meaningless reflection.”³⁴⁸

At first, this excerpt may appear troubling, as it seems to suggest that good and evil are not conceptually differentiated, but are only legitimate categories when chosen in freedom. But this lacks coherence, given that one can only ‘choose in freedom’ if one has available to them the conceptual framework by which one can determine what it means to do so in the first place. In other words, how does one choose good or evil without any idea of what these terms actually mean? This appears to undercut Haufniensis’s intricately developed view of freedom. So, it seems reasonable to assume this is not what the pseudonym has in mind. Is there a preferable alternative?

If we keep in mind the overall theme of freedom’s relation to possibility, an answer becomes evident: the claim that ‘the good is freedom’ must be understood in terms that echo the multilayered natures of freedom and possibility themselves. Just as freedom is not genuine freedom until it is actualized in the life of the person, so good and evil, if they remain only concepts, are not genuine, because they lack actual existence. They remain in the sphere of non-being, where, as concepts, they may have a profound impact as ideas, but accomplish nothing on their own. To think about the good is not automatically good. One can easily envision a person who thinks carefully about the good but in fact wills the evil. Conversely, one can imagine a person with a well-developed concept of evil who employs that concept as a means by which to do the good. Kierkegaard is ultimately interested in the person who does the good, not the person who merely thinks about the good.

³⁴⁸ CA, p. 111-12/SKS 4, p. 413.

Of course, one might ask how a person would will/do the good if they haven't thought about it. But as important as this question is—and Kierkegaard does think it is important; after all, he spent his life writing books to help elucidate what he considered to be genuine Christianity³⁴⁹—it is secondary to the action one takes in response to what they have thought about. Just as existential possibility exists within the broader context of metaphysical possibility, so also concepts like good and evil must be understood not only in terms of their conceptual existence, but also their *actual* existence, that is, whether I am actually doing the good, or failing to do the good, which is evil. The paradox comes when we ask how it is that one who has been, until that moment, sinless 'falls' into sin through their own entangled freedom.

It seems we are caught in a catch-22: if the person's freedom is entangled, does that not somehow make them less culpable for their sin, or eliminate their responsibility altogether? Conversely, if we grant freedom to the extent that Kierkegaard seems to want to do, are we not leaving open the possibility that a person may choose *not* to sin? For the Christian, is this not tantamount to eliminating the need for salvation in and through Christ? Kierkegaard's reply to the latter problem is rather straightforward; he points to Christ himself, and asks us to take seriously the Chalcedonian claim that Christ is fully divine and fully human. This means believing that there is at least one person who did not choose to sin. Accordingly, even though it may be 'impossible' for any person other than Christ to do so, choosing to live a life without sin is not necessarily impossible for a human being. Christ exemplifies a possibility that challenges the ways in which we understand humanity. Accordingly, it is precisely the case that human beings *do* have, in some sense, the capacity to live sinless lives.

But, nonetheless, we do sin. In *CA*, Haufniensis posits a number of ways in which human anxiety has developed, to the extent that it is fair to conclude that it is quantitatively 'impossible'

³⁴⁹ *PV*, p. 12/*SKS* 13, p. 19.

for a human being to live a sinless life.³⁵⁰ This recognition is connected to Haufniensis's response to what he calls the 'fantastical' idea of original sin.³⁵¹ Original sin, if conceived according to traditional categories, results in the bizarre situation that Adam's sin is of an entirely different type than everyone else's subsequent sin. This leads him to question whether Adam was really a human being. Any reply that suggests multiple levels of sin/humanity within Adam, even if they are all redeemed by Christ's saving work, makes Adam seem even more foreign from us. Sin, Haufniensis concludes, must be a category that applies to all human beings in the same way. But sin also has a 'history', and the increase of sin in the world becomes an ever-increasing quantitative barrier for human beings—but it is never a qualitative barrier, otherwise a sinless human life would be impossible.

As a devout (if somewhat unorthodox) Lutheran, Kierkegaard has no desire to promote Pelagianism, and Haufniensis, anticipating the criticism, strenuously denies that his account of anxiety infers such an outcome.³⁵² However, he frankly insists that sin must remain inexplicable, and reminds us that the closest we can get to explaining sin is by way of reference to the entangled, anxious freedom that precedes, and proceeds, from the absurd leap into sin. (Indeed, both sin and faith are equally leaps into the absurd.) In his journals, Kierkegaard argues that any obstacle within freedom "must lie in freedom itself," since if the obstacle is external to freedom it would serve as a potential motivation to claim that human beings are not responsible for their sin.³⁵³ He goes on to claim that this obstacle within freedom is sin, and if sin is allowed to

³⁵⁰ See, for instance, *CA*, p. 54/*SKS* 4, p. 359: "anxiety means two things: the anxiety in which the individual posits sin by the qualitative leap, and the anxiety that entered in and enters in with sin, and that also, accordingly, enters qualitatively into the world every time an individual posits sin." As a result of this situation, there is, in "the relationship of generation," a "'more' in such a way that no individual can escape this 'more', which is a 'more' to all subsequent individuals in their relation to Adam." (*CA*, p. 64/*SKS* 4, p. 368-69.)

³⁵¹ *CA*, p. 25-26, 32/*SKS* 4, p. 332-33, 338.

³⁵² *CA*, p. 34, 37/*SKS* 4, p. 341, 343.

³⁵³ *JP* 1246/*Pap* IV B 118:1, *n.d.*, 1843-44: "otherwise there would be no freedom at all or the disturbance would be a matter of chance which freedom could remove."

“rule... then freedom disperses itself and is never in a position to realize repetition.”³⁵⁴ Only the self that is given freedom anew, as religious repetition, is able to overcome sin.

The upshot of this argument is that although it is theoretically possible for a human being to live without sin, the reality of our situation is that both individual anxiety and the dispersion of anxious freedom throughout history have led to a situation where, now more than ever, it is reasonable to say that human beings cannot help but sin, yet remain culpable because their sin was not necessitated by any external factor. This means that all human beings, if they have the self-consciousness necessary for the recognition of possibility, must be considered sinners, since they all have sinned in response to the awakening of the anxiety of possibility, and will continue to commit sins as anxiety proliferates, if not given the capacity to actualize religious repetition, which is not merely an abstract possibility, but may be concretized via the act of faith that believes, or, better, *believes in*, what would otherwise be considered impossible.

Haufniensis’s claim that anxiety is ‘freedom’s possibility’ indicates the extent to which these three terms are bound together in Kierkegaard’s ontology. I suggest that, like freedom, anxiety is best understood through the category of possibility. If anxiety is the inevitable response to ‘the possibility of possibility’, then it seems we should interpret anxiety itself as catalyzed by possibility. Anxiety is the psychological response to possibility per se. It is the response of the finite mind to the infinite concept; in this case, the speculative category of metaphysical possibility. Much like the Kantian sublime, which arises in response to a world that exceeds our comprehension and power, Kierkegaardian anxiety is the response that cannot help but arise in ourselves as we face the truth of our being in the world. Sin is the inexplicable outcome of this situation, but one that we find ourselves in, even as we recognize that we are somehow responsible for the decision to sin. Possibility is woven into the concept of anxiety as

³⁵⁴ Ibid.

the underlying category through which freedom and anxiety both come to be and, in the case of the latter, may be overcome.

Freedom is Grounded in God

This brings me to my final correlation between freedom and possibility. I offer an extensive analysis of Kierkegaard's view of God in the next chapter, but at this point I simply note that for Kierkegaard freedom and possibility, like all elements of reality, are grounded in God. Let's consider what this entails. I have already noted that Anti-Climacus describes the power that establishes the self as that in which the self is meant to 'rest transparently'.³⁵⁵ Given that the definition of the self in *SUD* is notoriously abstract, how can we make sense of this idea of the self resting transparently in the power that establishes it? Clues are found in the final unpublished draft of the text. There Kierkegaard asserts, "The true relation of freedom is this: freely to be completely in the power of the good, of freedom, or in the power of that in whose power one can be only by being free and through being in whose power one becomes free."³⁵⁶ The power that establishes the self is the power of the good, and this power is not only the means by which the self becomes free, it is freedom itself. Kierkegaard, or at least Anti-Climacus, takes for granted that this power is God.³⁵⁷

What can we say about the relation between freedom and the power of the good (God)? How does this grounding take place, and what is its form? Responses to these questions can be found, at least partially, in *Works of Love*. There, Kierkegaard compares the freedom of a loving heart with the freedom of an arrow or a captured bird that has been released: "The bird is free

³⁵⁵ *SUD*, p. 14/*SKS* 11, p. 130.

³⁵⁶ *SUD*, p. 147/*Pap* VIII 2 B 170:6, *n.d.*, 1848.

³⁵⁷ *SUD*, p. 16/*SKS* 11, p. 132.

only because you let it go, and the arrow speeds forward only because it leaves the bow-string... but the free heart does not become free through the cessation of resistance—it was free, it had its freedom—and yet it found its freedom... what blissful freedom that finds what it has!”³⁵⁸ The actuality of freedom is thus described in terms that seem strangely akin to recollection—the ‘free heart’ finds the freedom it already had. However, as we might expect, Kierkegaard does not leave the matter here. The freedom of the loving heart per se is not equivalent to the heart of a Christian: “A pure heart is not a free heart in this sense... since a pure heart is first and last a *bound heart*... A bound heart, yes, in the deepest sense a bound heart—no ship riding with all its anchors out is as bound as the heart must be that is to be pure—namely, that heart must be bound to God.”³⁵⁹

Kierkegaard goes on to say that the pure heart must be bound to God “without limit” and “in the deepest sense.”³⁶⁰ What, then, is being described here? Is there freedom to be found in the second, bound heart? If the answer to the latter question is ‘yes’ (and it is), then we are dealing, again, with multiple types of freedom. The difference between the two is that the former is a kind of abstract freedom, whereas the latter freedom is concrete; that is, truly chosen and actualized in repetition. Kierkegaard indicates this is the case when states that the free heart has “no consideration” and “no history.”³⁶¹ The free heart “throws itself into the delight of giving itself,” but the pure heart of the Christian is “infinitely bound to God,” which is its one “infinite consideration.”³⁶² Similarly, the free heart, when it gives itself away, gains a “history of love, happy or unhappy.”³⁶³ But the pure heart becomes a part of a reality that precedes it, and does not

³⁵⁸ *WL*, p. 148/*SKS* 9, p. 149.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid*, emphasis in original.

³⁶⁰ *WL*, p. 148/*SKS* 9, p. 149-50.

³⁶¹ *WL*, p. 149/*SKS* 9, p. 151.

³⁶² *Ibid*.

³⁶³ *Ibid*.

end: “that eternal love-history... began with your beginning, when you came into existence out of nothing, and, just as surely as you do not become nothing, it does end at a grave.”³⁶⁴

One might rightly ask how it is possible for a human being to freely bind her pure heart to God in this way. The answer, according to Kierkegaard, is that we do not; God binds Godself to us, and it is by faith that we accept this ‘absurd’ possibility, which, in the ‘leap’, turns out to be true.³⁶⁵ According to Arnold Come, Kierkegaard is contending “that, in the definitive moment of freedom as an event, there is an irreducible element of indeterminacy: the leap.”³⁶⁶ That is, freedom is not found in the binding but in faith. This has to do with the question of ‘how’ rather than the question of ‘what’.³⁶⁷ The ‘how’, says Come, is *love*. Love, he asserts, is for Kierkegaard the genuine expression of freedom. Drawing upon *Works of Love*, Come states: “We call love ‘God’ because love alone is able to seek love and able itself to become the object of love, yet without seeking its own.”³⁶⁸ No human being can *be* love in this way; no human being is the object of love per se. Rather, the object of love is love itself. Further, “‘love’ gives ‘possibility’ its ethical character and explains what it means to be a human ‘self’ in ‘freedom’.”³⁶⁹

This approach, unfortunately, seems backwards. While it may technically be accurate—reasonably, only love itself can provide the content of the freely chosen decision to will the good, which is the movement of possibility needed to achieve genuine selfhood—it seems clear that, for Kierkegaard, it is God who determines the concept and not the other way around.³⁷⁰ That is, we must say ‘God is love’ rather than ‘love is God’. Kierkegaard rejects any attempt to place

³⁶⁴ *WL*, p. 150/*SKS* 9, p. 151.

³⁶⁵ I develop this further in chapter five.

³⁶⁶ Come, *Kierkegaard as Humanist*, p. 233.

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁸ Come, p. 353.

³⁶⁹ Come, p. 353-54.

³⁷⁰ See *WL*, p. 126/*SKS* 9, p. 129: “it is God who in every case will determine what is love.”

God within a conceptual framework, even one as vital as love. This is *not* to say that love isn't fully manifested in God, but rather that God cannot be subsumed into the concept of love, or any concept for that matter. Doing so threatens to place God within a category that will, in some sense, logically necessitate God's activity, and while this may be a satisfactory positioning of God in Kantian/Hegelian terms, it is not at all appropriate according to Kierkegaard. To be fair, Come seems to recognize this fact, but that only serves, in my view, to make his argument here all the more perplexing.³⁷¹

As with many disagreements, this one is ultimately about defining terms. Like Judge William's account of freedom in *EO*, here Come's definition of love appears to be driven by an internal logic. He says, "Love as duty to obey inward eternal love itself, therefore, is the source of freedom. This kind of love is 'eternally secured' ... because it is 'consciously grounded on the eternal' ... I am 'free' to love because the law of love is always eternally present in me."³⁷² Come recognizes that it is God who must provide the love that is needed in order that the self may respond by loving in freedom, but his definition of God as the "ultimate dynamic of reality" appears to place, once again, the terms 'God' and 'love' within a conceptual framework by which both can be logically equated, thus providing the assurance need to secure the love.³⁷³ But does this security not conflict with the assertion that the love must genuinely be free?

Come supports his case with a quotation that points to the dialectical nature of love:

³⁷¹ In his second volume, Come admits that he is troubled by the question of how the picture he paints remains true to Christianity: "if one grants much of the capacity of Christian loving to humanity in general, one has to wonder what is left that is essential and unique to a Christian view of self. This question has haunted me throughout the writing of this present volume." (Arnold Come. *Kierkegaard as Theologian: Recovering My Self*. Montreal, QC/Buffalo, NY: McGill-Queens University Press. 1997, p. xv.) It seems Come develops an argument that he later admits Kierkegaard would reject. This is perhaps an insufficiency in Come's methodology, which attempts, at least in *Kierkegaard as Humanist*, to remain "within the strictures... using 'religious' and 'God' to refer only to structures and dynamics of the human world that are universally open to human experience and description." (Come, *Kierkegaard as Humanist*, p. 132.)

³⁷² Come, *Kierkegaard as Humanist*, p. 357, see *WL*, p. 49ff/SKS 9, p. 56ff.

³⁷³ Come, p. 362.

“without law freedom does not exist at all, and it is law which gives freedom.”³⁷⁴ But this seems out of context. Kierkegaard is referring both to the biblical injunction to love, which already presupposes a distinctly Christian framework—one that Come admittedly overlooks in his ‘humanist’ reading—and also to the fact that, regardless of framework, adherence to a law is always contingent upon the prior acceptance of either the reliability of the law itself or the reliability of the law-giver. To place the law’s reliability within itself is, once more, to return to an internal logic by which the law may be ascertained and confirmed. Kierkegaard opposes this option, which would, by default, mean he stresses the reliability of the law-giver. And, indeed, this is what he does. Not only does Kierkegaard affirm that love “stands and falls with the Law of eternity—but then, of course, it never falls,”³⁷⁵ he also states that this law is a biblical, “royal Law,” which is to say, it comes from God and not from any rational principle.³⁷⁶ But, in so doing, he refutes the notion that we can start with a universal concept of love and then apply that to God.

What else can be said, then, about God’s relation to freedom, and freedom’s relation to God? At the risk of sounding pedantic, I simply note that for Kierkegaard all concepts must find their beginning and their end in God.³⁷⁷ What this means will be the focus of the next chapter. But an initial point might simply be this: if freedom begins and ends with God, it follows that to truly be free means to somehow be in a relationship with God. This is a basic Christian claim: reality *is* only inasmuch as it *is in* God. That Kierkegaard accepts such a claim seems fairly straightforward; what must be further examined are the ways in which he interprets the claim, and what bearing his views of God, freedom, and possibility might have on our understanding of

³⁷⁴ *WL*, p. 38-39/*SKS* 9, p. 46.

³⁷⁵ *WL*, p. 39/*SKS* 9, p. 46.

³⁷⁶ *WL*, p. 24/*SKS* 9, p. 32. Cf. James 2:8.

³⁷⁷ This is the heart of Climacus’s claim that a system of existence is actual only for God. (*CUP*, p. 190/*SKS* 7, p. 175.)

theological anthropology.

Interpreting the Relation between Freedom and Possibility

It appears, then, that Kierkegaard's argument for possibility is tied closely to a particular conception of freedom. It is a freedom that is concrete, fueled by repetition for the purpose of actualizing selfhood, beset by anxiety, and grounded in God. I have argued that this multitiered freedom exhibits qualities that find themselves paralleled in Kierkegaard's rendering of possibility. Ultimately, both freedom and possibility work together in order to bring about genuine selfhood, and this relation is necessary if there is to be a self, but at no point is the outcome necessitated. For, if existential actuality is necessitated, then there can be no individual freedom, and vice versa, since what takes place is not for the purpose of actualizing the self, but rather for the actualization of the whole (i.e., absolute spirit).

This is one of Kierkegaard's primary complaints against Hegelian philosophy: it makes free human action null and void. We also find the related concern that if the possible and the actual unite to form the necessary—thus making all things necessary—then there is also no longer *any* possibility. For, if the possible and actual must always form the necessary, then what is possible is, in fact, not possible after all, because all that is possible will be actual, since it is necessarily established that it must be so. But, one might say, there is much that is possible but not actual, since it is in the future and has not become actualized yet. However, on the Hegelian account, it is only a matter of when these possibilities will be actualized, since as soon as they are, they reveal their necessity, and all things are thereby proleptically necessitated. But, if all things are necessary in this way, then possibility, which is one-half of the dialectic that

establishes necessity, becomes an apparently empty concept and the articulation with which Hegel began is muddled at best.

Thus, Climacus argues in the *Fragments* that the very fact that necessity is the concept in which the other terms are joined makes the idea of freedom incoherent within Hegel's system. The account of necessity as the 'synthesis of possibility and actuality', often referred to as the "Hegelian unity of *an sich* and *für sich*,"³⁷⁸ is not an option: it is impossible, a self-contradiction, since it takes two concepts that cancel each other out and attempts to derive a positive result from them. Whereas, on the Hegelian account, possibility and actuality always join in necessity, for Kierkegaard, necessity and possibility are separate categories of being that meet and are transformed in the coming-into-being of actuality, which is constituted by freedom.³⁷⁹ Freedom relates the other terms, and freedom is maintained in the relation. This is not the case for Hegel, who seems to privilege maintaining necessity at the expense of freedom, in spite of an apparent commitment to free will rather than determinism.³⁸⁰

Another way to articulate this latter concern: if the actual is the historical, and if there is a necessity to history, how can we have genuine freedom? This echoes Climacus's critique of Hegelian logic; there is no free movement in logic because all the truths of logic remain necessary in the midst of actual change. In this sense, Kierkegaardian ontology blatantly resists

³⁷⁸ Mackey, p. 219. The unity of being 'in-and-for-itself' is one of Hegel's key phrases. See, for instance, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 14.

³⁷⁹ *PF*, p. 74ff/*SKS* 4, p. 274ff.

³⁸⁰ In his *Encyclopedia*, Hegel states that the "substance of mind is... freedom." (Hegel, G. W. F. *Philosophy of Mind: Part III of the Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* [William Wallace, Translator]. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971, Section 382, p. 15.) And, he continues, "Absolute mind knows that it posits being itself, that it is itself the creator of its Other, of Nature and finite mind, so that this Other loses all semblance of independence in face of mind, ceases altogether to be a limitation for mind and appears only as a means whereby mind attains to absolute being-for-self, to the absolute unity of what it is in itself and what it is for itself, of its Notion and its actuality." (Section 384, p. 19.) Further, in *The Philosophy of History*, we find that history "is none other than the progress of the consciousness of freedom," and that this progress takes place "according to the necessity of its nature." (Hegel, G. W. F. *The Philosophy of History* [J. Sibree, Translator]. Great Books of the Western World Series [Mortimer J. Adler, Editor-in-chief]. Chicago/London: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1990, p. 168.) From Kierkegaard's perspective, this is an error, since freedom that is necessitated is a truly contradictory idea.

Hegel's *Aufhebung*, as it rejects any attempt to sublimate necessity, that is, absolute necessity. The necessary must not be confused or conflated with the possible in the existential domain.

Kierkegaard echoes this criticism in his journals when he writes: "To go from possibility to actuality is a step forward (except in relation to evil); to go from actuality to possibility is a step backward."³⁸¹ That is, with regard to ethical existence, we must maintain a genuine dichotomy between what can happen and what must happen prior to an action, if ethics is to have any meaning. If a person cannot do otherwise, ethical responsibility is an empty concept. The Hegelian formula, with its preference for necessity, threatens to invalidate ethics by removing any possibility of genuine human freedom, the absence of which makes ethical choices equally impossible.³⁸²

But, even if one accepts that the Kierkegaardian account of necessity is superior to the Hegelian account, one might, however, critique Kierkegaard's analysis in another way. In his book *Faith, Reason, and History*, Robert C. Roberts asks whether, even if we admit that they have no logical necessity, historical events might not have causal necessity? Is history not causally determined? The basic argument is: if everything is due to some previous cause, then it would seem in principle that all historical events are in fact determined by the chains of causes which lead to their actualization. Such necessity seems to throw the Kierkegaardian hypothesis into disorder. Climacus, at least, employs freedom as an axiomatic, paradoxical category. Is he guilty of reification? Climacus's initial response is to point out the limited scope of such an

³⁸¹ *JP* 1059/Pap X 2 A 439, *n.d.*, 1850.

³⁸² Joel Rasmussen notes: "In a number of his works, Kierkegaard protests Hegel's naturalization of evil through the category of necessity, along with his *Aufhebung* of religious representations into philosophical concepts... Hegel's philosophy of Absolute Spirit makes subjective freedom nothing more than an illusion, and in the process he reduces ethics to a sham discourse." (Rasmussen, Joel D. S. "Kierkegaard, Hegelianism, and the Theology of Paradox." *The Impact of Idealism: The Legacy of Post-Kantian German Thought: Volume 4, Religion* [Nicholas Boyle, Liz Disley, Nicholas Adams, Editors]. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 104.)

argument.³⁸³ Since causal necessity applies to all natural events (everything in the universe has a cause), we either have to limit our discussion to necessity in relation to the natural world—thereby becoming reductionists—or we have to admit that existence as such is not simply reducible to everything in the natural world. That is, reality includes more than just the natural causes to which we might appeal for causal necessity.

It is fair to say that Climacus’s response here is philosophically unrefined; indeed, one could accuse him of positing the conclusion in advance and then framing his argument so that it fits his conclusion. Roberts suggests that Climacus decides to “postulate some ‘freely acting cause’, a cause that itself cannot be accounted for by reference to items in the string.”³⁸⁴ That is, he conceives of a free cause of possibilities that is not reducible to the ‘string’ of possibilities. Such an account will not likely be satisfactory for those, like the reductive materialist, who may immediately ask why one should accept that such a ‘first cause’ must exist. Roberts also notes, “Climacus does not argue that humans have freedom. He asserts it dogmatically, as a belief highly congruent with and perhaps even necessarily implied by Christianity, and seemingly also implied by ordinary moral conceptions, such as guilt and responsibility.”³⁸⁵

This dogmatic commitment to freedom might be a weakness in the Kierkegaardian model. However, there are philosophical accounts that lend credence to such an approach. For example, some argue that we have intuitive grounding for our belief in genuine freedom, and that such a belief ought to be presumed ‘innocent’ until proven sufficiently ‘guilty’.³⁸⁶ This could be coupled with an epistemology that suggests it is reasonable to believe in something that may prove existentially beneficial, even if one’s evidence for that belief is lower than the standard one

³⁸³ Roberts, p. 105.

³⁸⁴ Roberts, p. 106.

³⁸⁵ Roberts, p. 109.

³⁸⁶ Tim Mawson adopts this sort of attitude toward libertarian free will. See his book *Free Will: A Guide for the Perplexed*. London/New York: Continuum, 2011.

might otherwise apply to knowledge claims. Another option is Alvin Plantinga's 'proper basicity', which argues that a person's noetic structure, that is, the complete set of beliefs held by a person, includes some beliefs which are properly basic. In other words, they are not based on any antecedent beliefs but are simply self-sustaining.³⁸⁷ To reject this claim means accepting that one never has a starting point for one's beliefs, which leads to an infinite regress. If a view similar to Plantinga's is defensible, the reductionist critique seems to be neither rock solid nor insurmountable. The belief in freedom, like belief in God, may be properly basic. Additionally, Kierkegaard might find support from those who advocate for knowledge as 'familiarity' rather than propositional knowledge.³⁸⁸

Come, echoing Vigilius Haufniensis, the pseudonymous author of *The Concept of Anxiety*, reminds us that, for Kierkegaard, "Freedom... is in the end something simple. It is so simple that there is no way to explain it."³⁸⁹ It is similar to sin, in that freedom presupposes itself and cannot be explained by any prior or higher concept. Freedom is experienced and can be somewhat defined in everyday life, though it cannot be finally explained. Freedom and possibility are closely related, but they are not the same. For Kierkegaard, freedom relates the other terms—possibility, actuality, and necessity—and freedom is maintained in the relation. It

³⁸⁷ See Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God." *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, Editors). Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983, pp. 16-93. Plantinga also develops these ideas in his works on 'warranted' belief. C. Stephen Evans provides an excellent overview of Plantinga's arguments and their resonance with a Kierkegaardian account of belief in God (C. Stephen Evans. "Kierkegaard and Plantinga on Belief in God: Subjectivity as the Ground of Properly Basic Religious Beliefs." *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self: Collected Essays*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006, p. 169-182.). Note that it is only the proposition 'God exists'—a proposition which is itself put forward as the result of certain intuitive beliefs about God's relation to the believer—to which he refers; no other beliefs about God are brought in as support for the claim, since on Plantinga's account none are needed. This allows Plantinga to place belief in God alongside other commonly intuited propositions, such as the belief that there is a world independent of my thoughts or that there are other minds besides my own. Claims that such properly basic beliefs must be either rationally self-evident or empirically incorrigible are themselves unjustified, on Plantinga's view.

³⁸⁸ See Mimi Marinucci, "Knowledge as Kennenlernen: Subjectivity, Pluralism, and Intimacy." *Social Epistemology: A Journal of Knowledge, Culture and Policy*, Vol. 24, No. 4, Oct – Dec 2010, pp. 301-311.

³⁸⁹ Come, *Kierkegaard as Humanist*, p. 109. See also *CA*, p. 112/SKS 4, p. 414. It is also worth considering how one might conceive of divine simplicity in this Kierkegaardian (or, more precisely, 'Haufniensian') framework.

remains an integral component of these relations, but one that cannot be defined or limited by those terms.

Summary

I have argued in this chapter that Kierkegaard conceives of freedom as a multifaceted term that is connected to possibility. Accordingly, he rejects the Hegelian view of freedom, which unites freedom with necessity. Kierkegaard insists that the necessary must not impinge on human freedom. This leads to some crucial considerations: If the necessary does not come into existence, how does it relate to the historical? Climacus states that it is through freedom that non-being comes into being.³⁹⁰ What, then, is the point of contact for freedom between the eternal and history? It is most fully seen in the reflexive self that chooses.³⁹¹ But what happens to the self (or any coming-into-being) at the moment of transition? And how does the freedom which actualizes possibility come about? In other words, can Kierkegaardian freedom really be grounded in self-reflexive consciousness? Some of the answers to these questions will be considered in the next chapter, which focuses on Kierkegaard's view of God, and God's relation to possibility. I suggest that in order to properly make sense of Kierkegaard's modal terminology, a certain theological vision must be in place where God is seen as the source from which all possibilities may come to be.

³⁹⁰ *PF*, p. 75/*SKS* 4, p. 275.

³⁹¹ This is a major premise found in the eponymous as well as the pseudonymous writings. See, for example, *UDVS*, p. 195/*SKS* 8, p. 292: "Since, then, the human being is consciousness, he is the place where the eternal and the temporal continually touch each other, where the eternal is refracted in the temporal."

Chapter Three: Possibility and God

Introduction

In the previous chapter, my intent was to clarify the connection between possibility and Kierkegaard's well-established commitment to human freedom. In this chapter, I will endeavor to show that Kierkegaard ultimately views God as both the essence and the source of freedom and possibility. This is more than merely a dogmatic claim on his part, but that may not initially be obvious. While not discounting his insistence that genuine knowledge of God stems from individual relationship rather than philosophical speculation, I suggest that Kierkegaard's conception of God includes (at least) three interrelated metaphysical themes: possibility, eternity, and freedom. While a complete analysis of Kierkegaard's view of God extends beyond the confines of this dissertation, the connections between these three foci will be explored. Accordingly, I consider his description of God as 'that all things are possible' and his account of the 'Eternal One'.

At the same time, Kierkegaard's ontological commitments carry with them certain theological implications, and these can especially be seen when viewed in the light of Kierkegaard's pluralist account of possibility. One of these, I will argue, is that God's nature is best depicted not in terms of ability, but as responsibility. That is, although Kierkegaard does make use of some of the instruments of metaphysics, his primary concern is not to construct a rational argument for God's existence or to offer a doctrine of God. Rather, he endeavors to describe the relations between free human beings, existing as possible selves, and the God who provides their possibility and selfhood. God is ultimately responsible for the actualization of metaphysical possibility, but human beings endowed with the capacity to respond to God are responsible for the existential actualization of the possibilities available to them, particularly

those possibilities available in faith.

God is ‘That All Things are Possible’

It would be a mistake to say that Kierkegaard operates with a singular definition of God, or even that he is primarily concerned with defining God in philosophical terms.³⁹² Nevertheless, it is also the case that he makes confident assertions concerning the nature and attributes of God. Therefore, to assign Kierkegaard the status of a mere apophatic theologian is to miss the mark.³⁹³ One of his most suggestive pronouncements is that God is “that all things are possible.”³⁹⁴ I take this phrase to be a reflection of one of his fundamental claims regarding the character of God.³⁹⁵ Moreover, this reading is consonant with the view that Kierkegaard’s authorship is largely the outworking of authentic religious commitments.³⁹⁶ The depiction of God as entailing possibility is put forward in several variants throughout his writings, but the most developed account is found in *The Sickness unto Death*. Accordingly, I will examine that text in further detail below.

To say that God is ‘that all things are possible’ is to invoke a torrent of questions. First, there is the problem of what it even means to say this. The phrase is taken from the synoptic

³⁹² Kierkegaard eschews what he calls “a phantom-battle about the predicates of God;” this, however, is not because he thinks God cannot be described, but rather that any philosophical account of God’s attributes will ultimately run up against irresolvable aporias. (*JP* 1348/*Pap* VII 1 A 143, *n.d.*, 1846.)

³⁹³ David Law oversimplifies the epistemological situation when he claims that for Kierkegaard God is primarily ‘unknown’. (See David Law. *Kierkegaard as Negative Theologian*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 162ff.) While God is beyond human reason, the fact remains that human reason is employed by Kierkegaard in order to clarify his theological assertions. This dialectical relation between reason and faith cannot be easily resolved. As Law rightly points out, Kierkegaard does not say that concepts don’t matter; rather, he attempts to clarify the proper relation between God and human beings. (Ibid, p. 163.) But this, too, is a matter of reasoning as well as faith.

³⁹⁴ See *SUD*, p. 35ff/*SKS* 11, p. 151ff.

³⁹⁵ As Sylvia Walsh states in *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*: “God is the infinite ground of all possibility for Kierkegaard, even that which from a purely human perspective is clearly impossible. Indeed, the belief that all things are possible for God (Matthew 19:26) undergirds his understanding of the incarnation, salvation, faith, selfhood, and even the divine itself.” (Sylvia Walsh. “Kierkegaard’s Theology.” *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard* [John Lippitt and George Pattison, Editors.]. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 295.)

³⁹⁶ See *PV*, p. 5-6/*SKS* 13, p. 12-13.

Gospels, where it is typically understood to be a statement regarding the power of God in effecting salvation by grace, rather than a metaphysical claim about God's ability to actualize possibilities.³⁹⁷ Kierkegaard, however, seems to view the statement in metaphysical terms: God, in some sense, *is* possibility.³⁹⁸ But how does Kierkegaard understand this claim? Is God an impersonal conceptual force? That would contradict Kierkegaard's clear commitment to the Christian claim that God's ultimate expression in the world is in the person of Jesus Christ. Does he think that God can literally do anything whatsoever?

Additionally, there is a related question that lingers from the previous chapter. There we saw that Kierkegaard considered inappropriate any attempt to reduce God's attributes to their conceptual forms; that is, we cannot simply begin, for example, with 'love' and apply that concept to God. Rather, we must begin with the theological claim that God is love. Kierkegaard attempts to maintain this view even in his description of God as possibility: God *is* 'that all things are possible'. But how can he claim that God is possibility, when he evidently opposes the assignment of God to a category of human speculation?

Here I return to my prior assertion: for Kierkegaard all concepts begin and end in God.³⁹⁹ But this does not mean he has no conceptual underpinnings in mind when developing his claims. If that were the case, he would simply assert all his claims dogmatically and not expend any effort arguing for those claims.⁴⁰⁰ But then, no longer would his claims to be 'without authority'

³⁹⁷ Matthew 19:26, Mark 10:27, Luke 18:27; Luke 1:37, by contrast, presents the claim in a negative form: 'nothing is impossible for God'. See W.D. Davies and D.C. Allison. *International Critical Commentary on Matthew 19-28*. London/New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2004, p. 53, and William L. Lane. *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of Mark*. Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1974, p. 370.

³⁹⁸ At least, this is the impression we get from Anti-Climacus: "the being of God means that everything is possible, or that everything is possible means the being of God." (*SUD*, p. 40/*SKS* 11, p. 155.)

³⁹⁹ See p. 122.

⁴⁰⁰ Kierkegaard does, of course, often make dogmatic assertions, but he also frequently attempts to support his claims using logical argumentation. To provide just one brief example: in *SUD*, immediately after establishing his definition of selfhood, Anti-Climacus describes "The Possibility and the Actuality of Despair" and offers several

and his desire to speak to the ‘single individual’ who assesses ideas rather than simply imbibing them carry any weight, since he would asking his readers to believe *his* claims instead of appropriating the truth for themselves. Kierkegaard is likewise committed to the idea that one does not develop a relationship with God via speculation or systematization. Yet he does not stop speculating entirely, since his claims about God involve a kind of argument meant to impress its force upon the reader.⁴⁰¹ It seems reasonable to conclude that Kierkegaard is not axiomatically stating that God *is* possibility, but rather claiming that the divine essence is, in some sense, properly interpreted as absolute possibility. This claim, while not established *by* concepts, must nevertheless employ some metaphysical underpinnings in order to be coherent.

My assertion, then, is simply that Kierkegaard’s Christian beliefs are entwined with several key metaphysical assumptions, one of which is that *God’s essence entails absolute possibility*.⁴⁰² Why possibility? Well, one obvious response is that Kierkegaard accepts the biblical claims made about God. But this, while apparently true, is somewhat misleading: Kierkegaard holds to a ‘high’ view of the Bible, and yet his appropriation of scripture seems

arguments for the dialectical nature of despair, including the fact that, in an abstract sense, the human possibility of despair reveals the superiority of human beings, insofar as it reveals their self-conscious awareness of their own condition. (*SUD*, p. 15/*SKS* 11, p. 131.) A dialectical tension is present in Kierkegaard’s writings themselves, as the relation between reason and faith is played out in Kierkegaard’s attempts to employ reason in his statements without letting it dictate the activity of faith. Several commentators have noticed this tension, including George Pattison, who notes: “whatever Kierkegaard’s own intentions may have been... There are areas in which, for all the vehemence of his polemics, he is making points that have a *prima facie* claim to be considered ‘philosophical’ in some sense.” (Pattison, *The Philosophy of Kierkegaard*, p. 7-8.)

⁴⁰¹ Take, for instance, the following: “A second-hand relationship to God is just as impossible and just as nonsensical as falling in love at second-hand.” (*JP* 1441/*Pap* XI 1 A 464, *n.d.*, 1854.) While it does not appeal to philosophical principles, it nevertheless also employs a kind of logic. The second-hand relation to God is deemed nonsensical because it betrays what Kierkegaard takes to be an obvious error; namely, that a relation only directly available to the individual may also in fact be available via some kind of mediation. While this is not systematic, it remains at least metaphysically-driven, inasmuch as it assumes some basic facts about the structure of reality—for instance, it insists on a duality between God and the world in a manner that Hegel (and others) would presumably take issue with.

⁴⁰² Kierkegaard states that the “original and primary” thought in his soul is that “God is love and his wisdom is infinite, his possibilities are limitless; and where I have scarcely one possibility, he has a million!” (*JP* 6489/*Pap* X 2 A 10, *n.d.*, 1849.)

nevertheless rather idiosyncratic.⁴⁰³ This appears to be the case with his interpretation of the passages that refer to God's possibility. Traditionally, among Christian theologians, possibility does not register highly on the list of common descriptors for God.⁴⁰⁴ Kierkegaard, however, gives possibility a central place in his account of the divine. Why might this be the case? I suggest that as we examine Kierkegaard's writings, an answer becomes clear: possibility is not only an integral feature of the God that Kierkegaard recognizes in the Bible, it also corresponds with the metaphysical concerns that he develops in response to the then-prevailing Hegelian account of reality.

The Hegelian Account of Divine Possibility

It is clear that by 1842 Kierkegaard considered the relations between possibility, actuality, and necessity a vital yet neglected area in speculative philosophy.⁴⁰⁵ This may have stemmed from reading Tennemann's *Geschichte der Philosophie*, which he owned, or perhaps it grew out of his dissatisfaction with Schelling's Berlin lectures.⁴⁰⁶ Kierkegaard further suggests that if

⁴⁰³ For a good overview of Kierkegaard's view of the Bible, see Joel D. S. Rasmussen. "Kierkegaard's Biblical Hermeneutics: Imitation, Imaginative Freedom, and Paradoxical Fixation." *Kierkegaard and the Bible, Tome II: The New Testament* (Lee C. Barrett and Jon Stewart, Editors). Farnham, Surrey/Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2010, pp. 249-284.

⁴⁰⁴ Augustine, for instance, sets forth the traditional view when says that we ought to conceive of God, "if we can and as far as we can, to be good without quality, great without quantity, creative without need or necessity, presiding without position, holding all things together without possession, wholly everywhere without place, everlasting without time, without any change in himself making changeable things, and undergoing nothing." (*De Trinitate*, 6.1:39-44.) The last clause in this definition seems opposed to the idea of the possible, which typically implies change. And although Kierkegaard remains strongly Lutheran in terms of both *theologia crucis* and salvation by faith, there is little evidence to suggest that Kierkegaard relies upon Luther for an account of God as possibility. (See Craig Hinkson's "Luther and Kierkegaard: Theologians of the Cross." *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3, No. 1, March 2001, pp. 27-45.)

⁴⁰⁵ *JP* 258/*Pap* IV C 47, *n.d.*, 1842-43.

⁴⁰⁶ Kierkegaard traveled to Berlin in 1842, primarily to attend lectures given by F. W. J. Schelling. He quickly became disillusioned with Schelling and returned to Copenhagen earlier than he had planned. This is clear from the letters he wrote while in Berlin to his friend Emil Boesen. See *JP* 5551/Letters, no. 68, February 6, 1842 and *JP* 5552/Letters, no. 69, February 27, 1842.

metaphysical speculation “declares that it thinks historical actuality, it is on the wrong path,” since the metaphysical, in spite of providing the overall paradigm in which reality takes place, does not necessitate the historical, which is only one of many possible ways that reality could be constituted.⁴⁰⁷ If the historical sphere is really free, then it is inconsistent to claim that the metaphysical paradigm in which history must be understood involves necessary claims about history’s development. In other words, it makes no sense to argue that we have actual freedom but are rationally necessitated, if in fact the rational is the actual and the actual is the rational. The Hegelians, Kierkegaard thinks, have not been able to overcome this dilemma.

These concerns influenced Kierkegaard’s perspective on divine necessity and possibility. Hegel, at least on Kierkegaard’s view, is guilty of confusing human freedom and divine necessity, such that both are corrupted. While there is some question about the extent of Kierkegaard’s first-hand knowledge of Hegel’s writings, it does seem that Hegel leaves himself open to such accusations.⁴⁰⁸ For instance, Hegel states that “although philosophical knowledge should clearly perceive the necessity of the religious standpoint... this does not hinder the will from being able to persist in its obstinacy, and to stand aloof from its necessity and truth.”⁴⁰⁹ This already sounds rather like an equivocation of the term necessity. Kierkegaard repeatedly criticizes this aspect of Hegel’s thought. In his journals, he writes: “The system ‘goes forward by necessity’, so it is said. And look, it never for a moment is able to advance as much as half an

⁴⁰⁷ Kierkegaard states: “It is the metaphysical insofar as this is the eternal bond of existence, without which the phenomenological would disintegrate; it is the accidental insofar as with every event there is the possibility that it could take place in infinitely many other ways; the unity of these (divinely regarded) is providence, and (humanly regarded), the historical. The meaning of the historical is not that it is to be annulled but that the individual is to be free within it and also happy in it. This unity of the metaphysical and the accidental is already implicit in self-consciousness, which is the point of departure for personality.” (*JP 1587/Pap III A 1*, July 4, 1840.)

⁴⁰⁸ For a critical assessment of Kierkegaard’s first-hand acquaintance with Hegel’s work, see Jon Stewart’s *Kierkegaard’s Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*.

⁴⁰⁹ Hegel. *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion, Volume 1*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, and Co., 1895, p. 5.

inch ahead of existence, which goes forward in freedom.”⁴¹⁰

The issue stems, at least in part, from what Kierkegaard takes to be the system’s insistence that absolute necessity dictates the actual world’s movements, while lacking a clear explanation about how this takes place in such a way that freedom is sustained. It looks as though either freedom has been eliminated, or the system is simply confusing its own terms. In the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Hegel states that “Thought is the activity of the Universal.”⁴¹¹ Thought is not the Universal *per se*; rather, thought provides a geography of the Universal, so to speak, but a geography in which the Universal, as the form of God accessible to thought, finds itself dispersed throughout the world. And, according to Hegel, “The Unity of God is always Unity, but everything depends upon the *particular nature* of this Unity.”⁴¹² Hegel insists that the ‘Idea’ exhibits a necessity to which both the natural and spiritual spheres must adhere.⁴¹³ Thus, it is not difficult to see why Kierkegaard honed his critiques in response to these issues.⁴¹⁴

In addition, many of the Hegelians at that time, including Kierkegaard’s former teacher and well-known foil Hans L. Martensen,⁴¹⁵ argued for a view of God that placed God in a

⁴¹⁰ *JP* 1616/Pap X 3 A 786, *n.d.*, 1851.

⁴¹¹ *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 1, p. 94.

⁴¹² *Lectures*, Vol. 1, p. 100, emphasis in original.

⁴¹³ *Lectures*, Vol. 1, p. 108ff.

⁴¹⁴ For Hegel, there is a ‘ground’ that makes possible the transition from one thing to another. This ground is the unity of identity and difference. However, as is often noted, this ultimately means that identity has the last word, resulting in ‘the identity of identity and difference’. Clearly in such a system, there is no room for contingency—any true contingency would “have to exist *outside* of the Absolute,” since the Absolute is necessary. (Nason, p. 153.) If it is ‘outside’ of the Absolute, then the Absolute presumably cannot be all of reality. Hence, it seems there can be no contingency in Hegel’s system.

⁴¹⁵ Hans Lassen Martensen tutored Kierkegaard in theology. Upon graduation, Martensen began to teach at the University of Copenhagen, and Kierkegaard apparently attended his course. Unfortunately, the relationship between Kierkegaard and Martensen was predominantly antagonistic, apparently due to Kierkegaard’s bitterness over Martensen’s success. In Kierkegaard’s view, Martensen was both a second-rate scholar and a purveyor of bad theology. This opinion, however, was likely influenced by what Kierkegaard viewed as personal slights against him by Martensen. (See Curtis L. Thompson. “Hans Lassen Martensen: A Speculative Theologian Determining the Agenda of the Day.” *Kierkegaard and his Danish Contemporaries, Tome II: Theology* (Jon Stewart, Editor). Farnham, Surrey/Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2009, pp. 229-266, and Curtis L. Thompson and David J. Kangas. *Between Hegel and Kierkegaard: Hans L. Martensen’s Philosophy of Religion*. Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press,

dialectical relationship with the world, such that both are dependent on each other.⁴¹⁶ Although the revelation from God's self-consciousness to the person's self-consciousness is dependent on God both for its ontological and epistemological consistency, it is also claimed that without human beings God would be unable to provide that revelation (since there would be no other self-consciousness to which the revelation could be provided), and thus God would remain, in some sense, less fulfilled than God otherwise might be. Hegelianism, as Kierkegaard sees it, typically understands the creation, including human beings, to be taking part in the very life of God, such that what happens to/in creation in some sense reflects what *must* happen to/in God. He notes in his journals, "The unconditioned, being-in-and-for-itself, is so frightfully strenuous for a human being, and therefore we would like to get rid of it, force a purpose upon God—and in that very second he becomes dependent upon finitude."⁴¹⁷

While this quote does not make any explicit reference to Hegel, the language of 'being-in-and-for-itself' is Hegelian and points to the above critique; namely, if we accept the unconditioned being of God (as the Hegelians did, on Kierkegaard's view), then we cannot dictate what God must do according to any human conditions, historical or otherwise. To do that is to make God dependent upon the creation in a manner that is unsatisfactory for Christianity. Hegel's theological anthropology proposes that in 'freely' surrendering to God's divine purposes human beings in effect provide God with an opportunity to express divinity in hitherto

1997, p. 41ff.)

⁴¹⁶ As Kangas and Thompson put it, "Martensen endorses the Hegelian move of placing the negative within the very self of God, i.e., with negativity becoming the eternal other by which God mediates the continuous divine passage from possibility to actuality. The dogma of Creation thus becomes the expression for God's alteration or othering, from which God returns to unity and restores Godself." (Thompson and Kangas. *Between Hegel and Kierkegaard*, p. 18.) It is worth noting, however, that Martensen himself was apparently somewhat ambivalent about Hegelianism and criticized certain elements of it. (Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, pp. 62ff.) Regardless of the extent of Martensen's commitment to Hegelianism, it remains the case that, rightly or wrongly, Kierkegaard viewed his Hegelian peers as having bought into a flawed conception of God's relation to the world.

⁴¹⁷ *JP* 1449/*Pap* XI 2 A 133, *n.d.*, 1854.

unactualized ways.⁴¹⁸ It is not that God lacks omnipotence. Rather, God's omnipotence depends on the created world, and particularly self-conscious persons, since it is by their self-conscious development that God is able to open up new vistas of possibility within Godself. In a sense, God *needs* the creation, inasmuch as God must create persons who will respond to God, in order for God to be both the creator and redeemer, as the system requires. God's creativity, particularly with regard to human beings, implies that human beings will respond to God's saving grace if they properly employ their reason. In this way, Hegelian theology ontologizes the Kantian ethical imperative.

Furthermore, the Incarnation of Jesus Christ is necessitated by the Hegelian concept of true religion.⁴¹⁹ This is the vision of God's 'becoming'. But such a vision overlooks the person's inability to accomplish the task of freely surrendering to God without God's involvement. For, if the person can accomplish this task on his or her own, then there is something the person can do that God cannot; namely, complete God's process of becoming. This blurs the line between God and the creation in problematic ways. At the very least, God would be dependent on human beings in a way that would call into question the traditional attributes of God. On the other hand, in the Hegelian system, if human beings are unable to accomplish the task, then both God and the creation are left incomplete, which is unacceptable. God's simple predetermination of all

⁴¹⁸ In Vol. 3 of his lectures on philosophy of religion, Hegel defines the 'consummate religion' (i.e., Christianity) as the religion in which "the *concept* of religion has become *objective* to itself." (Hegel. *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion, Volume 3* [Peter C. Hodgson, Editor]. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985, p. 61, emphasis in original.) Nature and spirit are united as God becomes self-conscious of Godself as both sides of the polarity: God/creation. Jesus Christ is born a genuinely finite human being who is also genuinely the infinite God. This is not only a reflection of the Idea, it literally *is* the Idea as both in-itself and for-itself. This is why the Christian religion is the highest form of religion for Hegel; it is the most complete religious expression of the consummation of the Idea. And since the 'concept' is the "entire content of reality" (Ibid, p. 64)—and given that Hegel also states that God is the "absolute idea" (Ibid, p. 66)—it is easy to see why the two can be equated in Hegel's theology. It is also easy to see how Hegel's understanding of God's activity must involve the necessary fulfillment of the concept, since they are one and the same. But this calls into question the freedom that Hegel claims is driving the movement of religion.

⁴¹⁹ *Lectures, Vol. 3*, p. 66: "Since we call the absolute concept the divine nature, the idea of spirit is to be the unity of divine and human nature... But the divine nature is itself only this, to be absolute spirit; hence precisely the unity of divine and human nature is absolute spirit."

human activity is also rejected by Kierkegaard.⁴²⁰ Human beings do have a role to play, but the task of becoming cannot be accomplished without God's help. Thus, while Kierkegaard was willing to employ the Hegelian model to a certain extent himself, he believed that, ultimately, God must be absolute in a way that the creation is not; that is, God can complete the creation, but the creation cannot complete God.

This means some conception of God's agency as external to the world must be brought to bear on the situation. If God is internal to a closed system of reality, as the Hegelian model seems to suggest, theology appears to be caught in a catch-22: if God depends on humanity for God's becoming, then God cannot currently be fulfilled and complete in Godself. But, then, what guarantee do we have that human beings, who have been created by God, can provide the appropriate conditions for God's becoming? In other words, if God is not absolute, then how can we trust ourselves to complete the task of God's becoming, since it is this incomplete God who has created us in the first place? It seems that only a power outside the system is in a position to fully provide the means by which the task of completing that system could be accomplished.⁴²¹

The 'Infinite Qualitative Difference'

Kierkegaard's response to this Hegelian vision of God is to employ a radical endorsement

⁴²⁰ For Kierkegaard, the Hegelian system finally overpowers the subjective freedom of the person: "[the error] lies mainly in this, that the universal, which Hegelianism considers the truth (and the single individual to be the truth by being swallowed up in it) is an abstraction... He does not come to God, the subjective in the absolute sense, or to the truth—that ultimately the single individual is really higher than the universal, namely, the single individual in his God-relationship." (*JP* 1614/ *Pap X 2 A 426*, *n.d.*, 1850.)

⁴²¹ This has direct implications for human freedom and possibility. As Houlgate notes, "Hegel... puts forward a conception of true freedom in which what is traditionally viewed as the opposition between freedom and necessity or constraint is dissolved." (Houlgate, p. 185.) In other words, for Hegel, there are limitations placed upon freedom by freedom itself, but these are not the sort of limitations which serve to restrict our freedom, but are the necessary limitations by which freedom can be what it actually is meant to be. And all of this is chosen by the self as a means by which it gives itself genuine freedom. Again, we have to ask how the self can accomplish this. Hegel seems to indicate that it is accomplished by God's doing, but this leads us back to the problem of how God can accomplish it if God is dependent on human beings in order to accomplish the task.

of God's 'otherness'; that is, he highlights the 'infinite qualitative difference' between God and the created world.⁴²² This difference seems obvious given the basic heterogeneity between God and the creation; one is eternal and necessary, the other is created and contingent. Kierkegaard insists that "heterogeneous qualities can never become homogeneous through continued self-relating to each other; on the contrary, the difference, the qualitative difference, the heterogeneity becomes more obvious."⁴²³ Thus, God's infinite difference from the world is what makes it possible for God to accomplish what we cannot, and it prevents God from being caught in the dilemma of dependence on the creation. Kierkegaard's radicalization of this difference is found in various texts, and perhaps his most provocative contention is found in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, where Climacus refuses to ascribe existence to God.⁴²⁴ But Kierkegaard alludes to the idea throughout his writings.

In the "Ultimatum" of *Either/Or*, for instance, we are presented with this same infinite difference in the form of a rhetorical question: "How could a person ever gauge his relationship with God by a more or a less, or by a specification of approximation?"⁴²⁵ The presumed answer is that we cannot: our relationship with God involves a qualitative difference that no approximation can replicate. And in *Fear and Trembling*, Johannes de Silentio describes three different expectations, and their corresponding objects, in this way: "One became great by expecting the possible, another by expecting the eternal; but he who expected the impossible

⁴²² See *JP* 1383/*Pap* X 1 A 59, *n.d.*, 1849. Incidentally, this is also an answer to the question raised in chapter two (p. 91) regarding the navigation between the Kantian and Sartrean dangers; Kierkegaard's theological solution highlights the infinite qualitative difference, so that God is not determined by laws of reason and, at the same time, human beings are not left without any ground whatsoever for their decisions.

⁴²³ *JP* 77/*Pap* X 3 A 186, *n.d.*, 1850.

⁴²⁴ *CUP*, p. 332/*SKS* 7, p. 303. As Sylvia Walsh puts it: "Strictly speaking, God does not 'exist' at all, as he is eternal and therefore does not come into or go out of existence but simply is, whereas existence is a finite, temporal category that applies only to created beings." (Sylvia Walsh. "Kierkegaard's Theology," p. 294.) There remains the question of how this 'non-existence' should be interpreted in light of the incarnation of Christ.

⁴²⁵ *EO*, 2, p. 352/*SKS* 3, p. 330.

became the greatest of all.”⁴²⁶ That is, it is one thing to have an expectation grounded in probabilistic reasoning (physical or epistemic possibility), another to ground one’s expectation in an ethical category, and an entirely different thing to base one’s expectations on the God who is responsible for all possibility.

We are most fully human when we admit, and live into, this qualitative difference: “Precisely because there is the absolute difference between God and man, man expresses himself most perfectly when he absolutely expresses the difference.”⁴²⁷ This stance is reflected throughout Kierkegaard’s writings. For instance, in *PF*, Climacus tells us that the teacher, God, is the one who not only gives us the knowledge of the truth, but also the “condition for understanding the truth.”⁴²⁸ To be in ‘untruth’, then, is to reject the condition, and not merely to be ignorant about the truth. This untruth reflects the same mistake as the Hegelian thinker who claims to have knowledge of the complete system, wherein God and creation are both necessary for its fulfillment. On Climacus’s account, both are guilty of the same error: rejecting the divine condition for truth. There is a difference between the person who lacks knowledge but accepts the condition, and one who rejects the condition. The latter person is in sin, and only God can save such a person. Of course, the upshot is that we are all guilty of sin, and one expression of this guilt is the mentality that asserts that God cannot complete the task of God’s own becoming without the assistance of the creation.

Thus Climacus articulates the inequality between God and human beings in terms of salvation. The “resolution” of God to save persons “does not have an equal reciprocal relation to the occasion;” that is, God is not bound by the condition in the same way that the person is.⁴²⁹

⁴²⁶ *FT*, p. 16/*SKS* 4, p. 113.

⁴²⁷ *CUP*, p. 412-13/*SKS* 7, p. 372-74.

⁴²⁸ *PF*, p. 15/*SKS* 4, p. 223.

⁴²⁹ *PF*, p. 25/*SKS* 4, p. 232.

Thus, though a person cannot free herself from sin by attempting to discern the truth while rejecting the condition by which the truth is known, God faces no such dilemma. Indeed, the person's attempts without God will only lead to more confusion and 'unfreedom', whereas God's resolution to save the person brings freedom. There is a moment, in the Kierkegaardian sense, when God's resolve to save meets the person's admission of their need for God. This "must be from eternity" though it is "fulfilled in time."⁴³⁰ This moment, Climacus tells us, "emerges precisely in the relation of the eternal resolution to the unequal occasion. If this is not the case, then we return to the Socratic."⁴³¹

Another striking example of this infinite difference has been articulated by Simon Podmore in his book *Kierkegaard and the Self Before God: Anatomy of the Abyss*. Podmore makes a compelling case that for Kierkegaard the most vital expression of the difference between God and humanity comes precisely in the forgiveness of sins; what we cannot do for ourselves, God can do, and this is seen most radically in the fact that God is able to forgive what by all human accounting is unforgivable.⁴³² Podmore describes the quality of the difference here: even in Christian forgiveness and eternal life there remains a "divine-human *alterity*... God's overcoming of the infinite qualitative difference does not represent mystical or ontological fusion, but an overcoming of *estrangement*... the triumph of divine *forgiveness* over *impossibility*."⁴³³ The application of this infinite qualitative difference to Kierkegaard's account of possibility seems to follow naturally—if there is an absolute difference between God and humanity, and humanity is limited according to certain determinations that prevent human beings

⁴³⁰ Ibid.

⁴³¹ Ibid. A similar perspective is found in the *Postscript*: "How highly embarrassing to be Creator if it turned out that God came to need the creature. On the contrary, God can require everything of every human being, everything and for nothing, since every human being is an unworthy servant, and the ethically inspired person is different from others only in knowing this and in hating and loathing all deception." (*CUP*, p. 136/*SKS* 7, p. 127.)

⁴³² Simon Podmore. *Kierkegaard and the Self Before God: Anatomy of the Abyss*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011, pp. 48-49.

⁴³³ Podmore, p. 49, emphasis in original.

from actualizing certain possibilities, then God must not be limited by those determinations. What's more, God responds to the human condition, not by establishing a set of principles or axioms by which we can ascertain God's presence, but by actually, temporally, being present with us. We discover who God is in a relationship of responsibility rather than in mere philosophical speculation.

God as Possibility in *The Sickness Unto Death*

It is in *The Sickness Unto Death* that God's possibility is most fully developed, and, as one might expect, the depiction raises questions that must be dealt with, if we hope to relate to God in the manner that Kierkegaard suggests. The account of God's possibility given in *SUD* is one that straddles a line; the language seems to suggest at times the kind of absolute declarations that leads some to worry about incoherence. Anti-Climacus states: "the being of God means that everything is possible, or that everything is possible means the being of God."⁴³⁴ But in spite of such sweeping statements, there are good reasons to reject some claims as simply impossible, even for God.⁴³⁵ Anti-Climacus's words must therefore be contextualized. Kierkegaard generally ties his statements about possibility to particular theological concerns, such as salvation and the forgiveness of sins. Thus Anti-Climacus says of salvation, "At this point, then, salvation is, humanly speaking, utterly impossible; but for God everything is possible! This is the battle of *faith*, battling, madly, if you will, for possibility, because possibility is the only salvation."⁴³⁶

⁴³⁴ *SUD*, p. 40/*SKS* 11, p. 155.

⁴³⁵ The examples typically given include God's inability to create certain objects, such as a rock that is too big for God to lift, and God's not being able to will or commit any evil action. The former is usually rejected as an incoherent statement, and therefore not a possibility at all. See below (p. 152ff) for Kierkegaard's response to the latter concern.

⁴³⁶ *SUD*, p. 38-39/*SKS* 11, p. 154, emphasis in original.

Here Kierkegaard (as the pseudonym) is dealing with possibility in the context of despair. We are told in *Sickness* that despair is a dialectical category of consciousness directed by the will.⁴³⁷ This disease of the spirit occurs when a person wills “to be rid” of herself.⁴³⁸ This takes place in two apparently contradictory ways. That is, a person despairingly wills ‘to be herself’ or despairingly wills ‘not to be herself’.⁴³⁹ In fact, says Anti-Climacus, these two are identical; they are, as it were, two sides of a single coin. On the one hand, the despair that wills not to be oneself is clear enough: the person rejects the task of selfhood because it is believed to be either impossible or undesirable. Rather than attempt to become a self that one does not want to be, the person in despair wills not to be herself. On the other hand, the person who in despair wills to be herself likewise finds selfhood undesirable, but instead of accepting the self that she is meant to become by grounding herself in God, the person attempts to create herself on her own terms and by her own power. Thus, while one form of despair is active and the other passive, they are, in the end, seeking the same outcome, and they begin from the same reference point: despair of becoming a self.

Anti-Climacus develops this dialectic of despair within the self in several ways, one of which is the binary of possibility and actuality. I will examine the dialectic of selfhood more extensively in chapters four and five, but suffice it to say that for Kierkegaard the solution to despair is God. In terms of possibility, this is articulated as God’s being ‘that all things are possible’. In other words, when the person despairs over her inability to become the self she hopes to be, it is because she has forgotten that for God *everything is possible*, including the completion of the self that the person despairingly believes to be impossible. Likewise, the person who, in despair, wills to be herself—by attempting to complete her selfhood on her own

⁴³⁷ *SUD*, p. 29/*SKS* 11, p. 145.

⁴³⁸ *SUD*, p. 20/*SKS* 11, p. 135.

⁴³⁹ *SUD*, p. 20/*SKS* 11, p. 136.

terms—has forgotten that *for God* everything is possible, and has, in despair, convinced herself that the possibility of self-completion is found in her own human capacities. Against both of these forms of despair, Anti-Climacus asserts that the issue is ultimately a matter of faith: “the question is whether... he will *believe*.”⁴⁴⁰ Faith in God means, for the believer, that all things are possible, including the impossible task of self-completion.

But this is not the abandoning of reason on behalf of faith; rather, it involves the recognition of our rational limits and the individual movement of faith beyond those limits. Kierkegaard stresses that we cannot limit possibilities merely to those that are consonant with human reason, but he also recognizes that those possibilities beyond reason are likewise inaccessible to it. He notes in a journal entry from 1850, “When, for example, I believe this or that because everything is possible for God, where, then, is the absurd? The absurd is the negative determinant which assures, for example, that I have not overlooked one or another possibility which still lies within the human arena. The absurd is the expression of despair: that humanly it is not possible.”⁴⁴¹ In other words, he is fully aware that possibilities like God’s becoming human and God’s forgiveness of sins will appear absurd to the rational mind. But the decision to believe, rather than despair, is precisely the movement in which the individual becomes open to these otherwise absurd metaphysical possibilities. Ontologically, we do not actualize such possibilities ourselves; God is responsible for their actualization. But we, as individuals, *are* responsible for the actualization of existential possibilities in our lives by the decision of faith.

Thus, Anti-Climacus’s claim that God is possibility is not primarily a speculative claim meant to evoke postmodern conceptions of alterity and deferment, although there may well be

⁴⁴⁰ *SUD*, p. 38/*SKS* 11, p. 153.

⁴⁴¹ *JP* 9/*Pap* X 6 B 78, *n.d.*, 1850.

roles for these in Kierkegaard's metaphysics. Rather, it is meant to serve as an admonition to the one in despair and as encouragement to the person of faith: "The believer has the ever infallible antidote for despair—possibility—because for God everything is possible at every moment."⁴⁴² In this way, the fact that for God all things are possible is a very good thing; if we begin with the theistic conception of God as essentially containing all perfections, including absolute goodness, then faith in God's possibility is the most profound hope of goodness available to human beings. As Kierkegaard reminds us in the discourse "On the Occasion of a Confession:" "There is a beginning everywhere, and the good beginning is everywhere where you begin with God; and no day is an unlucky day to begin, not even the unlucky day, if you begin with God."⁴⁴³

Without reading too much into the previous quote, it appears that Kierkegaard is willing to allow for a kind of fundamental autonomy that would make possible even the kind of indeterminacies that we now might describe in terms of the quantum level. Even an 'unlucky' day is 'lucky' with God. This is not anachronistic; I am not saying that Kierkegaard prefigures our current discussion of physics. Rather, I am pointing out the metaphysical implications of Kierkegaard's descriptions of the divine; namely, the ways in which a God that is 'that all things are possible' opens up new vistas of possibility, in which those things that might have previously seemed utterly preposterous or even unthinkable become thinkable by virtue of new levels of reality that are manifested in and through the world. In a manner analogous to the scientific and technological advancements that provide our species with hitherto unimaginable insights into the natural order of things, so God provides us with hitherto unimaginable insights into ourselves and our existence. The difference is that whereas the former involves the actualization of

⁴⁴² *SUD*, p. 39-40/*SKS* 11, p.155.

⁴⁴³ *UDVS*, p. 139/*SKS* 8, p. 237. Of course, one might reject Kierkegaard's view as nothing more than a utopian myth or Freudian wish. But the point here is not to prove whether Kierkegaard's God exists or not; it is merely to describe the character of that God.

epistemic possibilities, the latter involves existential and metaphysical possibilities—we don't just learn something new about the world, the world actually becomes something new. What is impossible for human beings is possible for God.

God as the 'Eternal One'

I now turn to focus on God as eternal; more specifically, God as the 'Eternal One'. Recall that Kierkegaard, as Climacus, has suggested that the category of existential possibility is not necessary, but exists due to the interaction between the necessary and the possible. This is differentiated from the category of absolute possibility, which is deemed to be necessary (and as such should not be given the name possibility, or should at least be viewed as a *sui generis* category). Metaphysical possibility, that is, the category of all possibilities, may account conceptually for all subsets, but Kierkegaard distinguishes between the subsets, and gauges their significance in relation to the authentic freedom which he takes to be foundational for actual existence. Additionally, all subsets of possibility apart from absolute possibility are contingent inasmuch as they retain the possibility of not being as well as retaining the possibility of being.

Understanding existential possibility in terms of contingency leads one to ask: Contingent on what? We have seen that Kierkegaard views God as the ground of all possibility, so that is the obvious response. But, while this is technically correct, Kierkegaard also answers this question in terms of the eternal; that is, contingent possibility is grounded in a kind of eternity.⁴⁴⁴ The self-conscious self, as the locus of the temporal and the eternal, is the primary human expression of

⁴⁴⁴ The Danish is *Evighed*. William McDonald notes that for Kierkegaard, eternity refers to “an atemporal, tenseless present, which transcends time, but, paradoxically, can also enter time. It is the entry of eternity as tenseless truth into time... which enables the becoming of a new self.” (William McDonald. “Time/Temporality/Eternity.” *Kierkegaard's Concepts: Tome VI: Salvation to Writing* [Steven M. Emmanuel, William McDonald, Jon Stewart, Editors]. Farnham, Surrey/Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2015, p. 167.)

freedom. Free action is vital and, indeed, necessary for selfhood. But this freedom is not self-grounded. That is, the self is dependent upon another for the gift of essential freedom which allows it to actualize its being freely. This is the condition of the self; Anti-Climacus posits this when he states that the self properly relates itself to itself when it “rests transparently in the power that established it.”⁴⁴⁵ But how is this consonant with the eternal? Arnold Come rightly claims that for Kierkegaard “true subjectivity (i.e., becoming ‘a relation which relates to itself’) requires a relating to the ‘eternal’.”⁴⁴⁶ But here again we face the complication of having to sort through layers of meaning to see what Kierkegaard has in mind when he connects God with eternity. For the two are not necessarily synonymous. Kierkegaard will occasionally express the eternal conceptually.⁴⁴⁷ And, unfortunately, he and his pseudonyms sometimes use ‘God’ and ‘the eternal’ interchangeably, which complicates matters.⁴⁴⁸

Nevertheless, in a specific sense, Kierkegaard uses the term ‘eternal’ to refer to God. God, for Kierkegaard, is the eternal *par excellence*; that is, God is necessarily eternal.⁴⁴⁹ If anything other than God is eternal, it is only because God’s eternity makes it so. It is important, therefore, to acknowledge that Kierkegaard does not strictly equate the eternal with God. Just as it is possible for there to be a necessity that is not absolute (e.g., it is necessarily the case that we cannot change the past, but the events of the past themselves are not necessary), it is also the case that something may be eternal, but not necessary. Consider, for instance, angelic beings or

⁴⁴⁵ *SUD*, p. 14/*SKS* 11, p. 130. See chapter four for a more detailed analysis of the Kierkegaardian self.

⁴⁴⁶ Come, *Kierkegaard as Humanist*, p. 150.

⁴⁴⁷ See, for instance, *CA*, p. 85ff/*SKS* 4, p. 388ff.

⁴⁴⁸ There are, however, indications that one must distinguish between the two. See *FT*, p. 16/*SKS* 4, p. 113: “One became great by... expecting the eternal; but he who expected the impossible became the greatest of all.”

⁴⁴⁹ Evidence for this claim is found not only in Climacus’s assertion that “God does not exist [*existere*], he is eternal,” (*CUP*, p. 332/*SKS* 7, p. 303.) but also in Kierkegaard’s exposition of the good in *Works of Love*. There, we learn that “the possibility of the good is more than a possibility, because it is the eternal. That is why the person who hopes can never be deceived, because to hope is to expect the possibility of the good, but the possibility of the good is the eternal.” (*WL*, p. 250/*SKS* 9, p. 250.) One could legitimately reason, then, that since Kierkegaard also views God as the absolute good, his statements are meant to invoke a realization that the good God is also eternal; indeed, it is God’s eternity that makes possible God’s goodness.

mathematical facts. These are things that, if they exist, presumably are eternal (that is, they are beyond temporality) but did not have to be—it is at least conceivable that God might have created a world without either of them. It seems legitimate, then, to argue that there is one kind of eternity that is not equivalent to God, and another kind of eternity that is found in what Kierkegaard refers to as the ‘Eternal One’.

A clear example of this is found in the discourse, “There Will Be the Resurrection of the Dead, of the Righteous—and of the Unrighteous.” There, Kierkegaard states: “What, then, is the eternal? It is the difference between right and wrong. All else is transitory.”⁴⁵⁰ This initially gives the impression that the eternal should be viewed primarily in ethical terms. However, Kierkegaard goes on to complicate that notion: “the difference between right and wrong remains eternally, just as he remains, the Eternal One, who established this difference *from eternity*... the Eternal One... changes everything, but never himself—and therefore never changes this either, eternity’s difference.”⁴⁵¹ Morality, then, is eternally established by the Eternal One, but more than that, it is established because the Eternal One upholds the eternal difference between right and wrong. Here, again, we find a description of an infinite qualitative difference between God and human beings; we can only attempt to distinguish the difference between right and wrong, whereas God establishes and sustains the difference in the first place.

But what does it mean for the Eternal One to uphold an eternal difference? It is difficult to make sense of the idea that God would uphold ‘differences’, because we typically take differences to imply imperfection. Kierkegaard describes the ‘Eternal One’ in terms that seem to uphold divine perfections—omnibenevolence, omnipotence, and immutability. This appears to clash with the idea of difference. Kierkegaard anticipates this criticism: “how can the eternal be a

⁴⁵⁰ *CD*, p. 207.

⁴⁵¹ *CD*, p. 208, emphasis in original.

difference? To be a difference—is it not a much too imperfect being to be able to be the eternal?”⁴⁵² He then offers the following response:

“[T]he eternal is not the difference either; the eternal is righteousness. But the being of righteousness has this perfection, that it contains a redoubling [*Fordoblelse*]; this redoubling that it has within itself is the difference between right and wrong. A being that has no difference whatever in itself is a very imperfect being, in part an imaginary being, such as the being of a mathematical point. A being that has the difference outside itself is a vanishing being; this is the case with the dissimilarities of this earthly life, which therefore vanish. The eternal, righteousness, has the difference in itself, the difference between right and wrong.”⁴⁵³

The ‘righteousness’ of the eternal presumably refers to God’s attribute of omnibenevolence or absolute goodness. But this perfect righteousness, according to Kierkegaard, is so only by virtue of retaining within itself the distinction of right and wrong. Otherwise, he claims, it would be a false god, by virtue of not having within itself the means by which its own perfection can be ascertained and maintained. This is posited as a sort of ‘third man’ argument; namely, if God does not maintain the distinction within Godself, then the difference must be somehow external to God, but if the difference is external to God, then God is not perfectly good, for there is some external category that is necessary for God’s goodness. If we posit a higher category of ‘divinity’ that holds together both the imperfect God and the external perfection, then we risk falling into a logical regress—why should we think that this higher category maintains the difference within itself? And so it goes, *ad infinitum*.

Thus Kierkegaard attempts to uphold God’s perfections by reformulating them in a manner that both appropriates and surpasses Hegelian accounts of difference. Kierkegaard agrees that the concept of absolute difference must be internal to the divine itself, if we are going to speak effectively of God’s perfection not lacking anything. But, contra the Hegelians, he also

⁴⁵² Ibid. A related question: how can God be the source of all possibilities, which presumably would also include all possibilities for evil, if God cannot be the source of evil?

⁴⁵³ Ibid.

asserts that this difference cannot be other than the divine, since that would place us in the position of having to say either that God is incomplete (and therefore imperfect), or that everything is divine in some absolute sense. I submit, then, that Kierkegaard's God is, paradoxically, both absolutely necessary and absolutely free, or, using different terminology, both absolute actuality and absolute possibility. Kierkegaard, however, refuses to employ such terminology precisely because he recognizes the inability of language and reason to capture the essence of the divine.⁴⁵⁴ While binary categories are necessarily employed in human logic, these theoretical structures dissolve when rigidly applied to God.

This recognition leads to Kierkegaard's insistence that God is best understood not in terms of metaphysical attributes or abilities, but as the divine 'Absolute' who relates intimately to every one of us as individuals, and who responds to us in love.⁴⁵⁵ For example, to think of God's being in terms of simple necessity, where God's decisions and actions are brute facts, eternally existing and unchanging, fails to take account of the fullness of God's perfection. It assumes that the essence of God simply *is* perfection, because we have logically valid arguments for this. But while Kierkegaard does not deny the validity of these arguments, they are insufficient. Just as a point on a line, unless it is actually related to other points, fails to have any real significance, so perfect righteousness, if it is going to exist as more than just an abstract possibility or necessity,

⁴⁵⁴ Law is correct to emphasize that for Kierkegaard "the *relationship* takes precedence over the concept." (*Kierkegaard as Negative Theologian*, p. 164, emphasis in original.) But, *pace* Law, the decision to subordinate the concept to the relationship is not made in the absence of conceptual considerations. This is why it is insufficient to simply say that "the relationship *always* has precedence over the concept." (p. 165, emphasis in original.) Though existentially prior, the relationship is not an actuality that the individual can maintain on his or her own. The relationship between God and humanity is always a paradox, and this is precisely why the relationship must be given precedence. We rely on God to actualize the possibilities that we cannot, but the possibility is metaphysically prior to the existential relationship; hence the tension. On the other hand, Mark Dooley's comments reveal the conceptual difficulties that arise when ascribing possibility and necessity to God: "Anti-Climacus asserts that to lack faith and belief is to lack possibility; the despair of a purely necessary being is that he or she has no possibility that can be actualized in the moment of responsible decision." (Mark Dooley. *The Politics of Exodus: Kierkegaard's Ethics of Responsibility*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2001, p. 110.) But this would imply that God is the most despairing of all, since God, as traditionally conceived, is the supremely necessary being. Clearly Anti-Climacus would reject that notion.

⁴⁵⁵ See *JP* 1441/*Pap* XI 1 A 464, *n.d.*, 1854; *JP* 6489/*Pap* X 2 A 10, *n.d.*, 1849.

must be related to that which makes it possible for that perfection to have any coherence. In the case of God, this means the perfection is fully manifested in God's relations to that which is not God. If we imagine a scenario in which there is nothing but God, terms like 'righteous' and 'perfect' are rendered incoherent, since there is nothing against which those terms can be contrasted and defined—unless God also somehow provides the contrast, the *difference*, as well.⁴⁵⁶

Unlike Hegelian dialectics, however, this does not make God dependent upon the world, for the difference itself is established eternally by God; thus, we might say that God's difference—or that which is not God—is that 'non-attribute' of God by which is maintained the ability to employ or sustain the divine attributes. This Kierkegaardian understanding of God also has implications for the way we conceive of evil. God's relation to evil, as that which is the corruption or even the very absence of all that God is, takes the following form: God's omnipotence is established and upheld by the very fact that God provides the possibility of evil and then wills that evil is never actualized within Godself. Indeed, on Kierkegaard's terms it seems reasonable to place evil within the category of 'non-being', such that evil is always a possibility, but one that God never actualizes, due to God's perfection. Thus the 'possibility' of evil (for God) falls into the paradoxical space of absolute possibility (in this case, as absolute *impossibility or non-possibility*), which is different from all other possibility. Outside of God, however, evil becomes a genuine possibility, and one that unfortunately has been actualized in the creation, either in a privative sense or in some other way.⁴⁵⁷

⁴⁵⁶ It is worth mentioning here the influence of F. W. J. Schelling: the Schellingian idea of God as both ground of reality and containing all reality—that which supersedes representation while at the same time providing the possibility of representation—and the challenges that come with that view seem to be reflected in Kierkegaard's approach to God. See, for instance, Schelling's *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*. See also Kosch, pp. 122ff.

⁴⁵⁷ This idea finds resonance in the *Journals*, where Kierkegaard muses that "God is like a poet. This is why he puts up with evil and all the nonsense and wretchedness and mediocrity of triviality, etc. The poet is related in the same

The decision to eternally give evil every opportunity to be and in the same eternal sense instead to will the good is what it means for God to be both omnibenevolent and omnipotent. This takes place eternally within God and therefore does not depend on the world. Evil's presence in the world is thus neither caused by God nor is it a symptom of God's dependence on the world in order to reveal or complete God's essence. Kierkegaard tries to express this idea in a rather lengthy journal entry from 1846:

“The whole question of the relation of God's omnipotence and goodness to evil (instead of the differentiation that God accomplishes the good and merely permits the evil) is resolved quite simply in the following way. The greatest good, after all, that can be done for a being, greater than anything else that one can do for it, is to make it free. In order to do just that, omnipotence is required. This seems strange, since it is precisely omnipotence that supposedly would make [a being] dependent. But if one will reflect on omnipotence, one will see that it also must contain the unique qualification of being able to withdraw itself again in a manifestation of omnipotence... All finite power makes [a being] dependent; only omnipotence can make [a being] independent, can form from nothing something that has its continuity in itself through the continuous withdrawing of omnipotence... omnipotence is able not only to create the most impressive of all things—the whole visible world—but is able to create the most frail of all things—a being independent of that very omnipotence.”⁴⁵⁸

Kierkegaard's intention here, I take it, is to show how God's omnipotence is maintained in spite of free human beings who have the capacity to will evil—but the principle applies directly to God as well. If God is omnipotent, that omnipotence is only genuine by virtue of its permitting that which is absolutely opposed to omnipotence to be a possibility. Otherwise, God's omnipotence is reduced to a self-enclosed power, rather than a power that can give itself away completely and still at the same time retain itself. By virtue of God's eternity, this giving away does not diminish God at all; indeed, God's eternal decision to refuse to 'will evil' means that

way to his poetic productions (also called his creations). But just as it is a mistake to think that what a particular character in a poem says or does represents the poet's personal opinion, so it is a mistake to assume that God consents to all that happens and how... But poetically he permits everything possible to come forth; he himself is present everywhere, observing, still a poet, in a sense poetically impersonal, equally attentive to everything, and in another sense personal, establishing the most terrible distinctions—such as between good and evil.” (*JP* 1445/*Pap* XI 2 A 98, *n.d.*, 1854.)

⁴⁵⁸ *JP* 1251/*Pap* VII 1 A 181, *n.d.*, 1846.

evil never actually exists in God, but the possibility of evil is always present as a possibility for God and is always refused by God's perfect omnipotence. This eternal divine refusal is the most complete manifestation of God's essential goodness and power.⁴⁵⁹ On the other hand, for God, the possibility of evil, since it will never possibly be actualized, apparently becomes a category of possibility that is somehow incommensurate with metaphysical possibility (thus, it may be best not to call it 'possibility' at all).

This solution will raise some eyebrows because it seems to suggest that God is *not* essentially good; that is, God contains at least possibilities for evil within Godself, even if those possibilities will, necessarily, never be actualized. How, it might be asked, can a truly omnibenevolent God uphold, even though they are eternally unactualized, states of affairs such as the possibility of mass murder, rape, or other horrors? This is a weighty and, perhaps, unanswerable question.⁴⁶⁰ However, it seems clear that Kierkegaard is suggesting these conceptual possibilities are in some sense legitimated by their role in God's eternal decision to create a world that exhibits genuine freedom. Kierkegaard takes for granted that freedom is an absolute good.⁴⁶¹ If we follow Kierkegaard's reasoning, he appears to be saying that divine freedom is one of the necessary correlates to God's omnipotence.⁴⁶² And, as a necessary correlate

⁴⁵⁹ This resonates with Karl Barth's conception of *das Nichtige*, or *Nihil*, which, as Barth develops in the *Church Dogmatics* III/3, is the 'negation' that is nevertheless not nothing; this negation stands against both God and creation as the nihilistic menace that faces us at every moment. It is not a property of God, and yet it cannot simply be described as 'not God' either, as it is prior to the creation and cannot be properly considered as literally nothing. As G. Vaughn Jones puts it, "it must somehow be from God, and it is because it is the object of God's No!, of his wrath and condemnation, that it is so problematical." (Geraint Vaughn Jones. "God and Negation." *Scottish Journal of Theology*. Vol. 7, Issue 03, September 1954, pp. 233 -244.) See also Christopher C. Green. *Doxological Theology: Karl Barth on Divine Providence, Evil, and the Angels*. London/New York: T&T Clark, 2011, pp. 153-186.

⁴⁶⁰ This line of reasoning is not unique to the Hegelian-Kierkegaardian tradition; a recent article by Andrew Loke highlights the contemporary discussion of this issue among analytic philosophers of religion. (Andrew Loke. "Divine Omnipotence and Moral Perfection." *Religious Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 4, December 2010, pp. 525-538.)

⁴⁶¹ *JP* 1251/Pap VII 1 A 181, *n.d.*, 1846.

⁴⁶² One could perhaps argue that God's aseity, as it is traditionally understood, dictates that whatever world God creates adds nothing to God. This would be akin to adding one to infinity (presumably, infinity is not affected at all). Does this not contradict the notion that God's omnipotence is greater with the creation than without? But this is not Kierkegaard's claim; rather, he is arguing that if there is no change or increase in God's perfections by virtue of

of a divine attribute, freedom itself must be one of God's perfections. Thus, it follows that God's goodness and power find their expression in freedom.⁴⁶³ If this is the case, then God must also eternally maintain some relation to those possibilities, which suggests that God upholds something that, at least potentially, is opposed to God. In so doing, God decides to be both responsible for, and responsible to, the creation.

God as Absolute Freedom

We find, unsurprisingly, that freedom is central to Kierkegaard's understanding of God. What, then, does divine freedom entail? The idea of freedom was delineated in chapter two, but I am now in a position to more fully articulate the connection between freedom and God. Traditionally, the theistic God has been acknowledged as perfectly free; freedom is one of God's essential properties. Freedom, in turn, is usually understood in terms of willing and doing; I am free when I can will to do something. For instance, if I will to drink tea this afternoon, I am only free if I am actually able to do it. To the extent that something (or someone) prevents me from being able to make that decision, I am not truly free. On the other hand, if I cannot will myself to drink tea (perhaps I have been brainwashed so that I despise the idea of tea), then I am likewise not truly free. God is said to have absolute freedom. However, God is not absolutely free in the sense that God can will to do literally anything. God's freedom is bound by God's goodness (just as God's goodness is bound by God's omnipotence, etc.). This, however, does not limit God's freedom in any way, because anything that God cannot freely will to do is taken to be either

God's relation to the world, it must be because God's essential nature is such that such a relation is somehow always already present in God's essential properties. Otherwise, we are effectively *denying* God's aseity.

⁴⁶³ While Kierkegaard does not develop this theme explicitly, it is consistent with his overall emphasis on the prominence of freedom.

nonsensical or self-contradictory, which is to say that it absolutely cannot be done by anyone, ever.⁴⁶⁴ Consequently, anything that can be freely willed, God can do.⁴⁶⁵

This assertion of divine freedom has an important corollary; namely, if God has the freedom to do whatever is possible, then it seems obvious that God has simply willed *not* to do a great many things. For instance, God has not willed that the earth is the planet closest to the sun, and God has not willed that I have green eyes. Here we run into a serious dilemma. Presumably, if God *did* will those things, they would be the case. So has God determined in advance that the world should be the way it is? This is another massive question that I must set aside.⁴⁶⁶ What matters at this point is that God is not limited by any circumstances other than those that would be absolutely self-contradictory. When it comes to the way things are in the world, God does not *have* to choose anything. If that were the case, then whatever God wills would be necessarily willed, and it follows that God could not will otherwise, for to do so God would have to contradict his own will. How can willing be necessary if it is able to be changed?⁴⁶⁷ So, at the very least, God's creative will is not eternal in the same sense that God is eternal *a se*, since, in that case, God's choice of *x* would be necessitated by the prior requirement to will to create *x* eternally and God would not retain genuine freedom. This does not eliminate the problem of theological determinism, but it does provide some context when discussing God's freedom.

But does this not conflict with Kierkegaard's description of God as 'that all things are

⁴⁶⁴ Examples might include God willing God's own non-existence or creating a square circle.

⁴⁶⁵ Said differently, for God 'all things are possible'. This does, however, create a dilemma in that it seems inconsistent to claim, on the one hand, that for God to will anything evil would be self-contradictory, and, on the other hand, to claim that the possibility of evil is always present for God to eternally refuse. I address this problem below.

⁴⁶⁶ Kierkegaard admits that some aspects of human existence are determined, such as my place of birth or my family history. Nevertheless, in spite of the deterministic features of my existence, I am able to make free decisions, particularly in the ethical and religious spheres of life.

⁴⁶⁷ This is sometimes put forward as God's being 'free from' imperfection and change, which is taken to be a uniquely divine sort of freedom. However, there is no reason to assume that 'free from' freedom should take the place of the freedom that seems necessary for choosing between options. To do so leads to the problem articulated above.

possible'? Even with the above caveats, how can God's eternal freedom and possibilities that contradict this freedom coexist? How can the possibility of evil, for instance, be a genuine possibility *and* at the same time be a self-contradictory state of affairs, given that God would never freely will evil? While more critical reflection on this point is surely needed, I suspect that this line of questioning may be a mistake. The problem, I suggest, is perhaps due to a detached representation of eternity; the depiction is one where God eternally chooses one option and rejects another as incoherent. But this implies a static view of reality in which all possibilities are present for God as eternal wholes, complete in themselves, and some of these possibilities are consistent with God's essence, while others are not. But is this the best way to view God's eternity? We have seen that Kierkegaard appears to reject such a view, suggesting instead that all possibilities are eternal *in relation to* God, some as eternal actualization, and others as eternal refusal. God's attributes, including eternity are best expressed dialectically. God, so to speak, *is* God's decisions, and it is inaccurate to describe any of God's decisions as 'completed', if by that we mean God has decided something and now has nothing more to do with that decision.

God's decisions are not 'once for all' events that have occurred, so that we merely continue to reap the benefits of those decisions, but rather they are eternal decisions upheld by God's free will in all moments.⁴⁶⁸ Thus, God's decisions, whether we are aware of them or not, are always already taking place, in spite of what may appear to us like impossibility. Absolute freedom is 'necessary' in the sense that all of God's decisions are eternal and unchanging, but it is not 'necessary' in the sense that there is, outside of time, prior to creation, a divine fiat, statically initiated, such that God never has to be involved again (except perhaps in order to punish those who challenge that divine fiat). Instead, God is always dynamically maintaining the

⁴⁶⁸ As Kierkegaard states in the *Journals*, "God who holds everything in his hand at every moment has possibilities to burn." (*JP* 1382/*Pap* X 1 A 20, *n.d.*, 1849. The Danish *Overflod* literally means 'abundance' or 'profusion' and conjures up images of affluence.

perfections that are God's eternal essence, and also the eternal possibilities through which the creation may respond to God in freedom. In this way, God's infinite qualitative difference from the world is eternally maintained as well. God's freedom is absolutely different from ours. Our human finitude and sinfulness limit our freedom. But God has no such limitations, and thus God can not only free us from sin, but also freely enacts possibilities that would otherwise be actually impossible.

If God is the eternal ground of human 'becoming' and selfhood, then it seems that one's relationship with God is never static, always changing, always becoming new. There remains a dilemma, however, regarding how the eternal God can maintain the presence of the possible *in actuality*, where, according to Climacus, the possible has been eliminated. In other words, "contingency and necessity *as such* do not exclude each other. How, though, is this related to free causality?"⁴⁶⁹ Another way to frame this concern: it is one thing to be given the quality of eternity for one's being. It is a different thing entirely to *be* the eternal, to have eternity essentially.⁴⁷⁰ Human beings are not eternal; they are not necessary beings. God, on the other hand, is eternal.⁴⁷¹ Recall that necessity (the absolutely possible) does not 'happen', since it always already is. Thus, if anything—God, the universe, or some ultimate substance—is absolutely necessary, it does not begin to be and it cannot cease to be. The necessary, in this sense, is the eternal. And the eternal *per se* cannot be realized or understood historically, since history is the realm of actuality.⁴⁷²

⁴⁶⁹ Nason, p. 157, emphasis in original.

⁴⁷⁰ This is consistent with Climacus's assertions regarding the 'condition' given by the teacher in the Fragments: "What does it condition? His understanding of the eternal. But a condition such as this surely must be an eternal condition... He receives the condition in the moment and receives it from that teacher himself." (*PF*, p. 64/*SKS* 4, p. 265-66.) That is, the human being has eternity as an inherent feature of her existence, but it is not a quality that the human being brings about on her own; rather, it is a quality that is given by another.

⁴⁷¹ This helps to clarify Climacus's assertion that God does not 'exist'. (*CUP*, p. 332/*SKS* 7, p. 303.)

⁴⁷² See *JC*, p. 141-42/*SKS* 15, p. 35-36. However, if the eternal enters into history, this is a paradox which can only be made possible by virtue of the absurd; that is, we can believe by faith that God enters into the actual, historical

However, the necessary and the eternal are not exclusively synonymous. Louis Mackey thus errs when he asserts that the domain of freedom *is* the domain of history.⁴⁷³ Nevertheless, the eternal must relate somehow to the historical; otherwise it seems difficult to explain why there should be any connection at all between God and the world. Logic seems inadequate to this task. Logically, a necessary truth must be an eternal truth. But, existentially, such necessary truths are a distraction, because they confuse the recognition of logically necessary truths with the belief that those truths must actually exist. Just because a statement is necessarily true in logical terms does not mean it is actually true (for that, its premises must actually be true). If we actually know such truths, then we know them absolutely, with certainty.⁴⁷⁴ Kierkegaard's point is that, in actuality, we cannot know whether statements or events involving the eternal are true in this way.⁴⁷⁵ Hegel, it seems, believed that all knowledge is determined by logical necessity. In this sense, everything actual is necessary. As we gain knowledge of the truth, all actuality will be revealed to be necessarily true.⁴⁷⁶ It is this necessity that Climacus challenges when he argues that the necessary "cannot be changed;" not only does nothing come into existence "by way of necessity," but nothing, by coming into existence, becomes necessary.⁴⁷⁷

How, then, might the eternal relate to the actual? Recall that the movement from non-existence to existence is an actual movement, otherwise Climacus's point about the change

world, but this cannot be logically resolved in either rational or empirical terms.

⁴⁷³ Mackey, p. 219. If this were the case, then God would not be free *unless* God entered into history, which implies that the Incarnation of Christ, for instance, is necessitated by the created world. This is precisely the sort of Hegelian model to which Kierkegaard was opposed. Hence, it is also an exaggeration for Mackey to claim that the eternal has no history in any sense whatsoever. Rather, if the eternal does have a history, it can only do so in the modes of being which are made manifest in possibility and actuality. This Kierkegaard calls a paradox.

⁴⁷⁴ Roberts, p. 103. For support, Roberts refers to Alvin Plantinga's book, *The Nature of Necessity*.

⁴⁷⁵ We might say that Kierkegaard is advocating for a kind of epistemic humility.

⁴⁷⁶ Following Climacus, Roberts questions this assertion: "[W]hat would it be for seven plus five equals twelve to become actual? It is already true, without anything at all having to happen... To suggest that something might happen with respect to it would be the profoundest category mistake. It is, as it were, the eternal." (Roberts, p. 104.) On the other hand, it may be that none of our statements as human beings can escape their temporal underpinnings. For instance, one might argue that even to say 'seven *plus* five' implies a kind of temporal sequence in which one *first* has seven and then one adds five to it, implying a spatio-temporal movement of some sort.

⁴⁷⁷ *PF*, p. 74/*SKS* 4, p. 274.

taking place not in ‘essence’ but in ‘being’ would make no sense. Thus, the necessary cannot come into existence (since it already is), but necessity and possibility merge to become actuality through freedom. That is, the necessary features of reality provide the structure within which possibilities may be actualized, and freedom is the means by which possibilities are in fact actualized. Consider a decision—say, my having eggs or cereal for breakfast. Presumably it is a genuinely free decision only if, until the moment my choice is made, both options remain. But having these two options is not something that can come and go, as it were; if the options are available to me, they must be available to me at every moment in which I am related to the decision.⁴⁷⁸ Said differently, decisions may be construed as non-actualized states of affairs. As abstract objects, they exist eternally; they do not suddenly ‘appear’ at the moment of decision. It seems bizarre, for example, to suggest that—all other factors being equal—on Monday there is a possibility for me to choose between eggs and cereal for breakfast, whereas on Tuesday there is not.

This suggests how the person, in freedom, is able to actualize the eternal. There must already be a prior existential relation to the eternal if freedom is to be properly employed. Presumably, every existential possibility is, abstractly, an ‘eternal’ possibility, though actually it may be extremely unlikely at some times and very likely at other times.⁴⁷⁹ I believe this is at

⁴⁷⁸ If I am not related to the decision in this way, then it is simply incoherent to ask whether I can decide anything; for instance, it makes no sense to ask me whether I can decide to spontaneously burst into flames (say, in the form of a phoenix) or not—there is simply no decision to be made, since I have no choice in the matter whatsoever. There are, however, innumerable choices to which I have a relation—that is, I do have a choice—and for each of those choices there exists a possibility, a state of affairs related to that decision, which I may choose to actualize or not. Climacus seems to suggest such a view when he says, “The possibility from which emerged the possible that became the actual always accompanies that which came into existence and remains with the past, even though centuries lie between. As soon as one who comes later repeats that it has come into existence (which he does by believing it), he repeats its possibility, regardless of whether there may or may not be more specific conceptions of this possibility.” (*PF*, p. 86/*SKS* 4, p. 284.)

⁴⁷⁹ One might attempt to rebut this point by arguing that each decision is a singular event, an act of volition that is ontic rather than ontological. Thus, to posit the existence of an infinite number of singular decisions as well as categories of eternal possibilities multiplies events beyond what is necessary. However, if there exist infinite possibilities (as states-of-affairs) then one could argue that Occam’s Razor-style arguments are unhelpful here.

least partially what Kierkegaard has in mind when he makes statements such as “Even at the last moment there is a possibility, or rather there is no last moment before it is past.”⁴⁸⁰ Every free decision actualizes one such possibility over against all others. In this way, every free decision relates to the eternal. Thus, in freedom the eternal and the historical relate, just as in freedom ‘being’ and ‘non-being’ relate. If there is freedom, it is found in the relation to the eternal. This clarifies Kierkegaard’s response to the question of how the eternal can maintain the presence of the possible in the actual, i.e., the temporal. God’s eternal freedom, a kind of necessary freedom, endlessly and continually populates reality with possibilities waiting to be actualized in various contexts.⁴⁸¹

It remains the case that eternal possibility is contingent for the creation. If a person already had this eternity as a metaphysically necessary feature of his or her existence, then there would be nothing special or unique about the eternal breaking in to the temporal. It would already *be* temporal, and that would nullify the concept, since the eternal is precisely not temporal. To see eternity as an essential feature of temporality short-circuits the eternal. Climacus suggests that many people view the eternal as a fundamental feature of their own existence rather than as a feature of humanity that is not absolutely necessary but that has been *given* to humans as a necessary property. In other words, they confuse the eternity of their humanity with a belief that they *are necessarily eternal*. Rather, as Climacus explains, it is the

Moreover, it seems very strange to say, for instance, that God’s decision to love a person is an infinite series of decisions that have no connection to each other besides the causal chains in which those decisions are made. If God decides to love me, then presumably that love is an eternal decision. Assuming a non-reductive view of human beings, is there any reason to think that our decisions as humans, in spite of their temporal qualities, do not also maintain this sort of connection to eternity?

⁴⁸⁰ *EUD*, p. 215/*SKS* 5, p. 215.

⁴⁸¹ This also explains how the aforementioned dilemma between God’s perfection and the possibility of evil may be resolved; the possibility of evil must exist, otherwise human beings would be unable to commit evil. God’s eternal refusal of that possibility is God’s perfection, but as human beings who lack that perfection, the possibility is available to us. However, rather than suggesting an imperfection in God, this actually reflects an imperfection in human beings; namely, we lack the power and goodness to eternally refuse the possibility of evil.

priority of the eternal (God) that makes possible the moment; that is, the giving of eternity to the temporal. Following Lessing, Climacus argues that there cannot be a “direct transition *from* historical reliability *to* an eternal decision.”⁴⁸² This is due, in part, to considerations regarding the disconnection between present, past, and future,⁴⁸³ but it is also a corollary of the claim that the primacy in the relation between the eternal and the temporal always resides within the eternal.

At this point, the theologically informed reader might raise an incisive question: what of the obvious counterexample to this argument—the incarnate God-man, Jesus Christ? After all, if Christ is the prototype, and (as defined by Chalcedon) is necessarily *both* God and human, then it seems obvious that the eternal and the temporal *can* exist together as essential features of one another. Without entering into a discussion of the various theological complications found here, I will merely point out that Kierkegaard appears quite content to follow a traditionally Lutheran interpretation on the divine and human natures of Christ, and his answer is to appeal to paradox: “The eternal truth has come into existence in time. That is the paradox... When the eternal truth relates itself to an existing person, it becomes the paradox.”⁴⁸⁴ Thus, Christ becomes the ultimate paradox, since in Christ the eternal God becomes a created being—the most radical and absurd

⁴⁸² *CUP*, p. 96/*SKS* 7, p. 95, emphasis mine.

⁴⁸³ For Kierkegaard, the eternal stands over and against the temporal, which corresponds to the historical/actual. Temporality, according to Vigilius Haufniensis, the pseudonymous author of *The Concept of Anxiety*, is not coterminous with eternity; that is, eternity is not unending time. Typically, we think of the ‘present’ as a demarcation in time. But, says Haufniensis, this is incorrect, since the present is never actually ‘present’, temporally. (*CA*, p. 86/*SKS* 4, p. 389; see also *WL*, p. 249/*SKS* 9, p. 249.) Rather, there is an imperceptible movement from the future to the past (or vice-versa), and the actuality of the present is something that has always already escaped us or never arrives. There is no precise measurement about which we can say, ‘this is the present’. In the *Postscript*, Climacus helpfully, though perhaps somewhat clumsily, describes the relation between the eternal and the temporal (i.e., the person) in spatial terms: “[T]he eternal aims from above at the existing person, who by existing is in motion and thus at the moment the eternal touches is already a little moment away from there.” (*CUP*, p. 488/*SKS* 7, p. 443.) Any use of the word ‘present’, therefore, is only a quantitative approximation of a qualitatively different idea, a conceptual confusion that must be avoided (or perhaps overcome). Kierkegaard states elsewhere that “temporality and everything pertaining to it are to a certain degree,” whereas eternity is a qualitatively different concept. (*UDVS*, p. 76/*SKS* 8, p. 183.) And Haufniensis suggests that it is better to view the present in terms of the eternal, which is to say that the eternal is an “infinitely contentful present.” (*CA*, p. 86/*SKS* 4, p. 389.)

⁴⁸⁴ *CUP*, p. 209/*SKS* 7, p. 192. For an overview of the various difficulties present in discussions about the Incarnation, see the introductory section of *The Metaphysics of the Incarnation* (Anna Marmodoro and Jonathan Hill, Editors.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

of all relations.

It ought to be noted, however, that Christ's status as the ultimate paradox does not take away from Kierkegaard's point regarding the priority of the eternal in freedom. According to Climacus, wherever there is a "break, in which the paradoxical accentuation of existence consists," it can only happen by virtue of the eternal: "If a break is to establish itself, the eternal itself must define itself as a temporality, as in time, as historical, whereby the existing person and the eternal in time have eternity between them. This is the paradox."⁴⁸⁵ Presumably this eternal 'breaking in' would apply to any individual who is in a relationship with God. Moreover, it is not that Christ's humanity is qualitatively different from ours; in that case he would not be fully human. Placing our humanity alongside his may reveal a profound difference, but this difference is one of degree rather than kind. The qualitative difference is that in the case of Christ we find that, in contrast to all other human beings (who are given the eternal via the 'breaking' of the eternal into the temporal), rather than the eternal merely establishing itself in the temporal, the temporal is somehow sustained in the very heart of the eternal; that is, the human nature of Christ is a quality of the eternal God, and this occurs without subsuming either category into the other.⁴⁸⁶

If a person claims to have understood this absolute paradox, Climacus states that they most certainly do not.⁴⁸⁷ Possibility is merely speculative without the free decision of the

⁴⁸⁵ *CUP*, p. 532/*SKS* 7, p. 484.

⁴⁸⁶ Chalcedonian Christology maintains that Jesus Christ's humanity is not an extra property added to the second person of the Trinity. However, this does not mean human nature is a necessarily essential quality of the Son. It seems correct to say that God did not *have to become* a human being, but has eternally and freely chosen to become human in Jesus Christ, and as such his humanity is not absolutely necessary. One could conceive of a world, for instance, created by God but lacking any humans. Presumably in such a world there would be no need for God the Son to be human. In the actual world, however, it is conditionally necessary that the Son be fully human.

⁴⁸⁷ "He will, misunderstanding, understand Christianity as a possibility and forget that what is possible in the fantasy-medium of possibility, possible in illusion, or what is possible in the fantastic medium of pure thinking (and basic to all speculative talk about an eternal becoming-of-the-deity is this shifting of the setting into the medium of possibility) must, in the medium of actuality, become the absolute paradox. He will... forget that understanding

individual to enter into the moment, to believe.⁴⁸⁸ Johannes Climacus expresses this well when he says: “With every move modern philosophy makes, it becomes conscious of the eternal significance of this move, or, better stated, it becomes conscious of the significance before it makes the move, for otherwise it would be conceivable that the move itself was such that it could never acquire eternal significance unless philosophy’s historical progress was absolutely identical with the idea’s own movement. But then such a step forward would not be a historical movement.”⁴⁸⁹ In pure speculation, one never connects the eternal with the actual. In pure historicity, where possibility is annihilated, the connection to the eternal is broken. This is why the historical evidence for the Incarnation can never be enough to compel someone to believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ. It is only in the moment, where history (actuality) is infused with the eternal through freedom, that such a possibility is present.⁴⁹⁰

Eternality and Necessary Freedom

The eternal, then, is the extrinsic ground for all possibility by virtue of its essential character. Freedom is that feature of eternality which makes possible the link between the eternal and the historical that results in the actualization of possibilities.⁴⁹¹ Human beings, who exhibit a

holds only for something of which the possibility is higher than its actuality; whereas here, just the opposite, actuality is the higher, is the paradox.” (*CUP*, p. 580/*SKS* 7, p. 527.)

⁴⁸⁸ And, of course, one may decide not to actualize that possibility, one may refuse to have faith.

⁴⁸⁹ *JC*, p. 140/*SKS* 15, p. 34.

⁴⁹⁰ If every conscious thought involves an element of the eternal, then one might argue that for thought to think the eternal in itself would be the highest goal. But this is already to presuppose what thought cannot think; namely, the presence of the eternal in historical existence. If one attempts to bypass this dilemma by arguing (cf. Hegel) that thought *can* think of its own eternal presence in this way, they face a new problem: such thinking must endlessly ‘keep pace with the eternal’, so to speak, in order to maintain a proper relation with it. But this, Kierkegaard argues, would mean that thought already has within itself the means by which to keep pace with the eternal, implying that thought is already eternal, hence calling into question the historical character of thought. Otherwise, how would “every single moment... become aware also of its eternal validity as a moment in the whole? That, after all, would require that the individual be omniscient and that the world be finished.” (*JC*, p. 141/*SKS* 15, p. 35.)

⁴⁹¹ In Come’s words, “Possibility becomes freedom only when the basic human duality of infinitude/finitude and

sustained relation between the temporal and the eternal, are syntheses of these two and their freedom derives from the freedom of the eternal. Divine eternity is also divine freedom.

Absolute freedom cannot be caused by anything other than itself; if anything else is its cause, it is not truly free but is necessitated by another cause. It appears, then, that in God we find a necessary freedom; that is to say, divine freedom is eternally necessary freedom. Is this an outright contradiction? It need not be.

We might conceive of necessary freedom as a dialectical movement in the eternal; that is, it is only by virtue of being the self-same source of all freedom and possibility that the eternal maintains its status as the necessary. For, what is absolutely necessary knows no causal chain outside of itself; all causes are by virtue of their source, and if the eternal is the ‘first cause’ which is itself uncaused, then it is reasonable to suggest that it contains within itself all potential causes, as possibilities that may be actualized in various subsequent chains of causation. And the eternal, beyond all chains of causation, has no other source than itself by which it actualizes possibilities. Hence we may say that the eternal *eternally wills the possible*, which is another way of saying that the eternal is free. Said differently, there is eternal (absolute) possibility, and freedom is the actual expression of this eternal possibility. Thus, although “the possible cannot be predicated of the necessary,”⁴⁹² in the case of eternal freedom, this holds precisely because the possible and the necessary cannot be reduced to a dichotomy. God is both the necessary eternal ground of all reality and the freedom through which that reality comes to be what it is.

possibility/necessity becomes pervaded and modified by the individual’s experience of temporality/eternity... only then does one ‘know’ and ‘believe’ that contemplation of infinite possibilities is not enough to effect a ‘transition’ from possibility to actuality but that there is also required of a person an absolute decision, a choice, an action with all possible intensity of one’s inward being. This decision, choice, action is ‘freedom.’” (Come, *Kierkegaard as Humanist*, p. 115.)

⁴⁹² *PF*, p. 75/*SKS* 4, p. 275.

Conceiving of God in Terms of Responsibility

But how might we make sense of this Kierkegaardian God, whose essence is eternally necessary freedom? How can God be both absolutely necessary and absolutely possible? This appears to be a mistake, since what is absolutely possible is typically taken to be necessary. In that case, there cannot be a dialectic, since we are not dealing with two opposites that form a synthesis; we are only dealing with one essential property: necessity. Moreover, if we employ the dialectic of absolute necessity and absolute possibility, doesn't this conflict with the claim that Kierkegaard wants to avoid classifying this sort of 'absolute possibility' *as possibility* in the first place?

Though some may consider it a blithe appeal to mystery, I repeat the assertion that limitations placed on possibility and necessity lose their fixity when we attempt to describe God-in-Godself. In God *a se*, the terms break down, because both the possible and the necessary are present in their fullness, and this results in an inability, on our part, to assign God to any specific modal category, since it is only by separating and defining our terms that we are able to place things into categories in the first place. Nevertheless, we must do so, simply because there is no other way we can speak of things besides using human categories. There is a thorny question about language here—whether or not our speaking of God constitutes an analogy of some kind, and what that might entail—but I must set that aside.⁴⁹³ Rather, I want to suggest that, given these limitations, Kierkegaard recognizes, as many theologians have done, that there is an

⁴⁹³ Kierkegaard states in *Works of Love* that all human language about the spiritual is “essentially metaphorical.” (*WL*, p. 209/*SKS* 9, p. 212.) The Danish word he uses is *overført*, which literally means ‘carried over’. Kierkegaard creatively teases out the meaning and asserts that when a person speaks about the spiritual, she is letting herself be carried over to another world where the words, though still the same in a “sensate-psychical” manner, mean something new. This suggests that God’s attributes may not be best served by applying technical terminology to God in a manner that may require God to operate within the rational boundaries set by those terms. In other words, should we assume that our terms capture God’s essential properties, or are we willing to let God, in effect, set the very terms of our discussions about God?

alternative: we can speak about God as we understand God to be in relation to the world and ourselves. We can speak of God's *responsibility* rather than God's mere *ability*.

We have seen that God as the infinite qualitative difference somehow provides the conditions for the actualization of our possibilities, that God as eternal is responsible for upholding the difference that makes those conditions possible, and that God as freedom provides the means by which the actualization of those possibilities take place. Finally, for Kierkegaard, Christ is the revelation of the responsibility God takes for the creation in that God becomes a member of the creation, a human being, in order to fully inhabit the world and redeem it.⁴⁹⁴ Kierkegaard's God is "infinitely interested" in the world.⁴⁹⁵ This God is "at one and the same time infinitely close to man and infinitely far away."⁴⁹⁶ Moreover, God is conceived primarily in terms of love and possibility.⁴⁹⁷ This is the essence of God as responsibility. God is not only responsible in the sense that the creation relies upon God for everything, at every moment, but God also responds in love to the creation at every moment, so that in every situation one is able to hope in God's response. This God risks being merely psychologized, but for Kierkegaard our decision to believe is the response of faith rather than offense at the dilemma invoked by the realization that God is infinitely interested in us. A re-envisioning of God's attributes in terms of responsibility is, I submit, in line with Kierkegaard's conception of God.

Viewing God in terms of responsibility flows from what I have developed so far. Kierkegaard recognizes that God's possibility is expressed primarily in correspondence to the becoming of that which is other than God, and, conversely, in God's eternal refusal of negative possibilities in Godself. To say that we should speak of God primarily in terms of responsibility

⁴⁹⁴ See *PC*, p. 103, 106-07/*SKS* 12, p. 111-12, 114-15.

⁴⁹⁵ *JP* 1450/*Pap* XI 2 A 170, *n.d.*, 1854.

⁴⁹⁶ *JP* 1451/*Pap* XI 2 A 171, *n.d.*, 1854.

⁴⁹⁷ *JP* 6489/*Pap* X 2 A 10, *n.d.*, 1849.

rather than ability is to recognize, with Kierkegaard, that the becoming of all things, including ourselves as human beings, ultimately depends on God. But it also involves the acknowledgement that to be primarily concerned with God's abilities is, in the end, to adhere to a lesser paradigm; when we focus on establishing the fixed boundaries and quantitative extensions of divine attributes, we are in danger of overlooking what is of primary importance for faith in God; namely, the *difference* that God makes in our lives and in the world.

Fundamentally, religious believers trust that God is changing, or will change, the world for the better. Christianity, for instance, has traditionally taught that God is redeeming and transforming the world, so that all the evil and suffering that has existed throughout history will be overcome and made right. In this setting, metaphysical accounts of God's attributes serve not primarily as logical parameters by which God can be adequately categorized, but rather as speculative accounts that offer reasons to hope in that redemptive promise. These claims cannot be verified on the basis of logical consistency or speculative realization. They can only be believed, which is precisely why the claim that for God all things are possible can only be made on the basis of faith. As de Silentio puts it, when Abraham believes that even if he kills his son Isaac, God will return Isaac to him alive, he is "not speaking an untruth" because, in spite of the fact that Abraham knows full well that people do not return from death, "by virtue of the absurd it is indeed possible that God could do something entirely different."⁴⁹⁸

For Kierkegaard, the fulfillment of the promise requires an eternal, free God whose possibilities are endless. Moreover, this God must be omnibenevolent and perfectly loving. Kierkegaard states, "[I]f the slightest thing happened that could demonstrate or could even merely appear to demonstrate that God was not love—well, then all would be lost, then God would be lost, for if God is not love, and if he is not love in everything, then God does not exist

⁴⁹⁸ *FT*, p. 119/*SKS* 4, p. 206.

at all.”⁴⁹⁹ This might reasonably appear to open the door to arguments against God’s existence in the form of evidential arguments for evil, for instance. And yet, Kierkegaard holds onto belief in the possibility of a loving God: “[I]f God is love, then he is also love in everything, love in what you can understand and love in what you cannot understand, love in the dark riddle that lasts a day or in the riddle that lasts seventy years.”⁵⁰⁰

Many deep theological questions, of course, remain unanswered here. For instance, if we say that God is that all things are possible, does this mean that God has already conceived or ‘imagined’ (what might it mean to say that God imagines?) every possibility? Then, if God has conceived all possibilities, but has only actualized some of these possibilities—even if that number is exceedingly great to the point of infinity—there clearly are possibilities that God has not actualized. What does this mean for God’s self-knowledge, or God’s foreknowledge? Can God be omnipotent and omniscient if God has not, in some sense, actualized all possibilities? And what does this entail for human freedom? While these are important questions, I must leave them for future exploration. For now, the point is simply that, for Kierkegaard, trusting in God involves a recognition of both God’s possibility and responsibility.

Summary

These chapters so far have provided more overview of Kierkegaardian possibility’s speculative features, but where does this leave us? After all, Kierkegaard was not primarily concerned with metaphysics, but with existential action. And haven’t I already pointed out that,

⁴⁹⁹ *UDVS*, p. 267/*SKS* 8, p. 364.

⁵⁰⁰ *UDVS*, p. 268/*SKS* 8, p. 365. This opens up the interesting possibility that Kierkegaard adheres to a form of skeptical theism.

for him, actuality is superior to possibility?⁵⁰¹ Will my entire project regarding the primacy of possibility turn out to be an exercise in futility? Not at all. I have already alluded to the actualized, or existential, features of possibility, and will examine them more closely in the next two chapters. Far from leading to the elimination of possibility, bringing existential features to bear upon the concept will reveal the extent to which possibility is indispensable for Kierkegaard's anthropology, as well as his theology (even though possibility is not the *telos* of the self). In the next chapter, I first explore the core of that anthropology: the self as defined and advanced in Kierkegaard's thought.

⁵⁰¹ See *JP* 1059/*Pap* X 2 A 439, *n.d.*, 1850: "To go from possibility to actuality is a step forward (except in relation to evil); to go from actuality to possibility is a step backward."

Chapter Four: The Kierkegaardian Self

Introduction

Before turning to the task of specifying the manner in which possibility drives the process of self-becoming, an account of the Kierkegaardian self is needed. To say that Kierkegaard was merely concerned with a philosophical concept of the self would be a mistake. Selfhood is, however, a primary theme in Kierkegaard's writings and one of the most heavily discussed areas of his work. Whether providing descriptions of the self's psychological complexity, its spiritual incapacities, or its teleological completion, Kierkegaard is concerned personally and deeply with the self. Realizing selfhood is one of his driving motivations, both as an author and as an individual. After all, it is only possible to discover "the idea for which I can live and die" to the extent that one knows who or what 'I' am.⁵⁰² Given Kierkegaard's emphasis on achieving selfhood, it is reasonable to expect that an accurate perception of selfhood will impact our appraisal of Kierkegaardian possibility, and vice versa. In this chapter I examine this interrelation by teasing out the implicit metaphysics of possibility at work in Kierkegaard's depictions of the self.

Kierkegaard is principally concerned with existential, ethico-religious considerations regarding selfhood. But as we have seen, this does not eliminate metaphysics; indeed, a metaphysics of modality underlies the existential movements that Kierkegaard takes to be foundational for our self-becoming. Put simply, possibility is a necessary, though not sufficient, ingredient for selfhood. The Kierkegaardian self, I suggest, is the locus (not the source) of possibility. My objective is to highlight the evidence for this claim. An account of the structure of the self must be provided, then, in order to apprehend the unique ways the self plays a role in the actualization of its own possibilities. Accordingly, in this chapter, I consider four aspects of

⁵⁰² *JP* 5100/*Pap* I A 75, August 1, 1835.

selfhood: self as synthesis (that is, the dialectical nature of selfhood), self as freedom, self as grounded in the absolute, and the self's task of becoming—and I begin to outline the connections between selfhood and possibility that will be further developed in chapter five. First, though, it is helpful to set out a generally working definition of selfhood.

A Brief Definition of Selfhood

There is a great deal of disagreement over how the self ought to be defined, and it is safe to say that no clear consensus has been reached. Dan Zahavi, for instance, notes that the term is not only “used in a manifold of rival senses,” but some contemporary philosophers consider the self to be nothing more than a complex illusion.⁵⁰³ Others suggest that without the actuality of the self it is impossible to make sense of other aspects of human existence, such as the consistency of consciousness.⁵⁰⁴ Generally it is recognized that selfhood has something to do with self-consciousness. Self-consciousness is tied to subjectivity; that is, what it is to be a subject, to experience the world as a singular self-reflective being. And, Zahavi rightly notes, “the problem of subjectivity will not simply go away.”⁵⁰⁵ We intuitively recognize that self-consciousness is a primary feature of our existence and cannot be too quickly written off. This means, at the very least, it is worth considering what Kierkegaard has to say about selfhood, since his analyses of the subject and its conditions remain some of the most creative and engaging available to us. For the present, let us say that the concept of selfhood has to do with self-conscious subjectivity, in particular as it is found in human beings.

It is true that Kierkegaard's writings do not contain anything like a present-day account of

⁵⁰³ Dan Zahavi. *Subjectivity and Selfhood*. Cambridge, MA/London: The MIT Press, 2005, p. 1.

⁵⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰⁵ Zahavi, p. 3.

selfhood. Nevertheless, there are at least tacit correlations between his views and more contemporary accounts.⁵⁰⁶ Accordingly, there is the question of how the Kierkegaardian self is to be understood. Is it simply a precursor to the Sartrean existential self? Does it prefigure the postmodern dissolution of the self? Can the self only be rightly understood in theological terms? Responding to these questions, many commentators employ a text-based methodology, typically turning to *The Sickness unto Death* and, to a lesser extent, *The Concept of Anxiety*, as primary sources for exploring Kierkegaard's view of selfhood.⁵⁰⁷ Consequently, these texts will be examined here. But rather than a textual methodology, I will generally employ a thematic one. I agree with John Davenport that Kierkegaard's idea of selfhood is "closely related to... his conception of freedom."⁵⁰⁸ Hence, I will investigate Kierkegaard's view of the freedom of the self and the 'becoming' of selfhood. I begin, however, with what I take to be the fundamental feature of the Kierkegaardian self: its synthetic, or dialectical, composition.⁵⁰⁹

⁵⁰⁶ Although I cannot develop it here, I believe that Kierkegaard's writings provide vital considerations on selfhood that proponents of the existential and phenomenological traditions now tacitly employ. Indeed, in *Subjectivity and Selfhood*, Zahavi draws deeply from the phenomenology of Jean-Paul Sartre, who relied heavily on Kierkegaard when developing his own brand of existentialism. It has also been argued that the accounts of subjective constitution and ethical action in Christine Korsgaard's *The Sources of Normativity* stem from Kierkegaardian standpoints. (See Walter Wietzke. "The Single Individual and the Normative Question." *The European Legacy: Toward New Paradigms*. Vol. 18, No. 7, 2013, pp. 896-911.)

⁵⁰⁷ Arnold Come goes so far as to assert that *SUD* is the pinnacle of Kierkegaard's work and final word on the subject. (*Come, Kierkegaard as Humanist*, p. xxi.) The Hongs, in the introduction (p. x) to *SUD*, also state that "*The Sickness Unto Death* is the consummation of his 'anthropological contemplation'."

⁵⁰⁸ John Davenport. "Selfhood and 'Spirit'." *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 230. Davenport places Kierkegaard in the 'personalist' tradition of theories about selfhood.

⁵⁰⁹ I agree with Evans that Kierkegaard's account of the self contains elements of, but is irreducible to, both metaphysical and relational accounts of the self. (See C. Stephen Evans, "Who Is the Other in *The Sickness unto Death*? God and Human Relations in the Constitution of the Self." In *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self: Collected Essays*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006, pp. 263-75.) At the same time, it is possible to locate the Kierkegaardian self within the broad metaphysics of possibility that I have been developing so far. In this way, I suggest that his account of selfhood is ontological as well as existential.

Self as Synthesis

Kierkegaard's descriptions of the self include a number of features, but perhaps the defining feature of this self is its dynamic-synthetic nature; that is, the self is thought of as a synthesis, a duality that is a self precisely in and through the contradictions created by that duality *and* the self's recognition of itself as the synthesizing of these contradictions. This is clear in passages from both *CA* and *SUD*, where Vigilius Haufniensis and Anti-Climacus, respectively, define the self in this manner.⁵¹⁰ But what Kierkegaard means by synthesis must be carefully parsed.⁵¹¹ Recall that the self is dialectically composed of objectivity and subjectivity; it encounters itself as always already both a thing in the world and a self-conscious subject singularly aware of its own existence, drives, and desires. Both the objective and the subjective are present in and to consciousness, such that the self-conscious self is a contradiction.⁵¹² But it is not a mere contradiction; indeed, the development of selfhood described by Kierkegaard echoes the crucial enhancements made by Kierkegaard to his own conception of selfhood. That is, the self we encounter in *CA* develops and expands in *SUD*, so that the final explanation is more multidimensional and weighty than the initial version.⁵¹³

Haufniensis's description of the self is set out on p. 43 of *CA*: "Man is a synthesis of the psychical and the physical; however, a synthesis is unthinkable if the two are not united in a

⁵¹⁰ "[M]an is a synthesis of psyche and body that is constituted and sustained by spirit." (*CA*, p. 81/*SKS* 4, p. 384.) "A human being is a synthesis... In the relation between two, the relation is the third as a negative unity, and the two relate to the relation and in the relation to the relation... If, however, the relation relates itself to itself, this relation is the positive third, and this is the self." (*SUD*, p. 13/*SKS* 11, p. 129.)

⁵¹¹ As noted in chapter two, the self-as-dialectical-synthesis motif is also found in *Either/Or*. Judge William describes the dialectic this way: "This self has not existed before, because it came into existence through the choice, and yet it has existed, for it was indeed 'himself'... I as free spirit am born out of the principle of contradiction or am born through my choosing myself." (*EO*, 2, p. 215-16/*SKS* 3, p. 206-07.)

⁵¹² *JC*, p. 167ff/*SKS* 15, p. 53ff.

⁵¹³ Alastair Hannay notes: "Kierkegaard talks of degrees of selfhood... one can be less or more of a self, depending on the degree of one's self-consciousness... the self is a less or a more full-blown self according to the person's consciousness of being a self. Selfhood is constituted *in* consciousness." (*SD*, Translator's Introduction, p. 7, emphasis in original.)

third. This third is spirit.” Unlike Anti-Climacus, who begins his account with ‘spirit’ and develops this in terms of synthesis, Vigilius begins with the synthesis and then points to spirit as a third, unifying component. This, in itself, hints at the mode of dialectic at work in Kierkegaard’s understanding of selfhood; the order of the terms is reversed, but as the concept develops we find that this ‘reversal’ is, in fact, an integral component of the concept itself. Selfhood, we are discovering, is a process that unfolds much like the definition itself unfolds within Kierkegaard’s writings themselves. As such, we should not be surprised that selfhood in *CA* is not developed to the extent that it is in *SUD*. Not only is this what we would expect to find as Kierkegaard continues to hone his ideas, but it suggests the manner in which the dialectic of selfhood is reflected in the writings of the author himself.

In some respects, this is obviously Hegelian. Indeed, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel describes the self as the “becoming” of experience and as “unrest.”⁵¹⁴ As Lee Braver puts it, Hegel’s conception of selfhood involves “movement or self-transcendence” that thwarts “simple self-identity.”⁵¹⁵ This is a historically-embedded self, caught up in the flux of temporality and, as such, is never at rest, not even in its own identity. To a great extent, Kierkegaard accepts this view and it informs his own account of selfhood.⁵¹⁶ As Merold Westphal puts it, for Kierkegaard, “selfhood is the goal rather than the presupposition of my existence.”⁵¹⁷ His commitment to a multilayered process of becoming is evident in early journal entries like this: “Just as it takes a long time for a child to learn to distinguish itself from objects... so the same phenomenon is repeated in a higher spiritual sphere.”⁵¹⁸ That is, the same

⁵¹⁴ *Phenomenology*, p. 11-12.

⁵¹⁵ Lee Braver, *A Thing of This World*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007, p. 75.

⁵¹⁶ Here, again, the influence of Schelling is notable; indeed, some have argued that Kierkegaard’s views on selfhood are more Schellingian than Hegelian. See Kosch, p. 122ff.

⁵¹⁷ Westphal, *Becoming a Self*, p. ix.

⁵¹⁸ *JP 5100/Pap I A 75*, August 1, 1835.

subject-object divide that we experience empirically is also always already present in selfhood.⁵¹⁹

Haufniensis focuses on the self as synthesis, but only in two basic respects. He states: “Man, then, is a synthesis of psyche and body, but he is also a *synthesis of the temporal and the eternal*.”⁵²⁰ But, he immediately notes a difference between these two syntheses: “In the former, the two factors are psyche and body, and spirit is the third, yet in such a way that one can speak of a synthesis only when spirit is posited. The latter synthesis has only two factors, the temporal and the eternal. Where is the third factor?”⁵²¹ We have already seen that the self-conscious person is, according to Kierkegaard, only that by virtue of a contradiction inherent to consciousness; namely, the self is both a subject and an object for itself at the same time. But although this may be conceivable when considering the self as spirit in relation to its own objectivity and subjectivity, how can such a contradiction take place between the temporal and the eternal, two categories that seem to be utterly opposed to one another? In other words, where is the ‘third’ in the relation between temporality and eternity? Without a third factor, a synthesis cannot really be completed; it remains a contradiction.

On p. 88, Haufniensis tells us the third factor is spirit: “The synthesis of the temporal and the eternal is not another synthesis but is the expression for the first synthesis, according to which man is a synthesis of psyche and body that is sustained by spirit. As soon as the spirit is posited, the moment is present.”⁵²² But what reason does Haufniensis have for thinking that spirit is that in which the temporal and the eternal are synthesized? The answer he gives depends on his

⁵¹⁹ However, Kierkegaard also recognizes that if there is no self-identical subject ‘outside time and change’, and if Hegel seeks to know the whole truth, then the Hegelian project will never be completed, because once time and change end (in death) we either admit the end of the system or we must make a metaphysical move wherein ‘the subject’ is outside the system.

⁵²⁰ CA, p. 85/SKS 4, p. 388, emphasis in original.

⁵²¹ CA, p. 85/SKS 4, p. 388.

⁵²² CA, p. 88/SKS 4, p. 392.

account of temporality, particularly the way the ‘present’ is defined. Haufniensis employs a Hegelian theory of temporality, according to which the present is the dialectical expression of the past and the future and, in itself, is nothing more than this relation.⁵²³ The present can only be viewed either through the lens of the past or the lens of the future. Accordingly, the present only exists as a concept for self-reflective conscious beings; it is only spirit, or self-consciousness, that brings the present into being, so to speak.

How does this take place? Spirit joins the temporal (past and future) with the eternal, which is understood here to be the mode of the dialectic in which the past and future are united. In other words, as long as there is a past and a future, there will always be the possibility of relating these two temporal movements in the mode of self-conscious reflection. In this sense the dialectic is eternal. And the eternal, as Haufniensis suggests in his description of the Hindu line of kings, is something that we encounter every day in our conceptual imaginings.⁵²⁴ The present, as such, contains nothing in itself except the ‘moment’. This moment, states Haufniensis, is neither simply a category of transition nor a category of mediation; as the “infinitely contentful present” it is the point at which the eternal and the historical merge in a manner that maintains both the fullness of the eternal and the contingency of the historical.⁵²⁵ In other words, if the eternal does not ‘touch’ time in the moment, then we are left with mere abstract possibility.

But why should the eternal and the temporal merge in more than merely a psychological sense? Said differently, why not simply accept that abstract possibility, available in and to thought, but absent from the self’s actual existence, is the only dialectic operating in the relation

⁵²³ CA, p. 85-86/SKS 4, p. 388-389. The Hongs explain that Hegel, in his *Philosophy of Nature*, describes the present as a ‘Now’ that is “exclusive of the other moments, and at the same time completely continuous in them, and is only this vanishing of its being into nothing and of nothing into its being.” (CA, p. 245, note 17.)

⁵²⁴ CA, p. 86/SKS 4, p. 389. Haufniensis describes, as an example of the vanishing of time into the present, the way in which a line of kings that extended for 70,000 years can be referred to as a single historical moment.

⁵²⁵ Ibid.

between temporality and eternity? Haufniensis's answer is that a "purely abstract" conception of the moment excludes the present, making the present nothing at all.⁵²⁶ If the present is merely psychological, there appears to be no reason to conclude that it really does exist. But if this is the case, then it is impossible to make sense of temporality, because temporality without the moment has no point of reference by which to measure itself. In other words, in order for the past and future to be understood *as* past and future, there must be some self-conscious subject for which those terms can be determined meaningful in a given context. Because self-conscious subjectivity exists, Haufniensis seems to conclude that both the temporal and the eternal must exist as well, since both are needed for the other concept to be understood by self-consciousness.

This argument may be philosophically weak, but it is reinforced by a similar dialectic developed in the *Postscript*. There, Climacus asserts that an "existing person" is composed of the "infinite and finite."⁵²⁷ While the terminology differs slightly from that used by Haufniensis, it is reasonable to say that these two pairs of terms express parallel dialectical concerns. That is, both are striving to relate components of human existence that appear to transcend the natural world with components that are, strictly speaking, natural. Climacus approaches this from an ethical angle, arguing that if there is an "eternal happiness," and if this is a person's highest good, then it follows that everything else will be of less importance in relation to that eternal happiness.⁵²⁸ This means the person must be related to eternal happiness "with pathos," i.e., existentially, since one cannot legitimately be related to one's highest good merely in the abstract.⁵²⁹ To relate to the highest good only in the abstract is quite simply not to be related to the highest good, because the highest good cannot be merely an abstract concept, but must be something to which one can

⁵²⁶ *CA*, p. 87/*SKS* 4, p. 390. He admits that some view the moment in this way, as when they say disparagingly that someone "lives only in the moment," meaning that one lives only in the abstract. (*CA*, p. 88/*SKS* 4, p. 391.)

⁵²⁷ *CUP*, p. 391/*SKS* 7, p. 356.

⁵²⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵²⁹ *Ibid.*

relate in actuality, otherwise its goodness is severely limited.⁵³⁰

Accordingly, eternal happiness “must be willed for its own sake... it is a contradiction absolutely to will something finite, since the finite [*endelig*] must indeed come to an end [*Ende*], and consequently there must come a time when it can no longer be willed. But to will absolutely is to will the infinite, and to will an eternal happiness is to will absolutely, because it must be capable of being willed at every moment.”⁵³¹ We see, then, that Climacus suggests a further solution to the problem faced by Haufniensis: why is the eternal not merely an abstract concept in the human mind? For the simple reason that to relate only to a concept in the mind is to finally relate to nothing at all, and if this is our situation then we must also admit that the entire edifice of ethics—or in Haufniensis’s case, of the temporally situated self-consciousness that is a precursor to ethics—is nothing more than an illusion. To say this is tantamount to skeptical self-defeat, in the eyes of the pseudonyms. Our willingness to pursue ethics, in spite of the suggestion that ethics is nothing more than a human mental construct, is evidence that the skeptical position is untenable.⁵³²

But what about human finitude and death? This, it would seem, is *the* limit, at least as far as human existence in the world is concerned. Does this not suggest that all of our willing is finite precisely because it is human willing? How does the possibility of any human willing something absolutely, such as an eternal happiness, not become an equivocation, or worse? Climacus recognizes there is a logical inconsistency here, and admits as much: “the reason it is foolishness in the finite sense is precisely that it is the absolute *τέλος* in the infinite sense... But

⁵³⁰ As Climacus puts it: “If an existing person is to relate himself with pathos to an eternal happiness, then the point is that his existence should express the relation... If it does not *absolutely* transform his existence for him, then he is not relating himself to an eternal happiness.” (*CUP*, p. 393/*SKS* 7, p. 358, emphasis in original.)

⁵³¹ *CUP*, p. 394/*SKS* 7, p. 359.

⁵³² I take this to be the meaning of Climacus’s claim that “an absolute relation to a relative *τέλος* would be unreasonable.” (*CUP*, p. 397/*SKS* 7, p. 362.) “But,” he continues, “the absolute *τέλος* is present only when the individual relates himself absolutely to it, and they cannot... have each other or tranquilly belong to each other in existence, that is, in temporality.” (*Ibid.*)

the pathos lies in the individual's expressing this existentially in existence; the pathos lies not in testifying to an eternal happiness but in transforming one's own existence into a testimony to it."⁵³³ In other words, Climacus admits that from the side of finite human reason the commitment to an eternal happiness will appear absurd, but he asserts nevertheless that the only way one can truly be committed to eternal happiness as the highest good is by existentially willing oneself to be related to it as the highest good. While such a commitment may appear irrational from the side of finitude, it remains the case that only by committing oneself to the highest good in this way can one genuinely be related to it. Climacus insists there can be "no shortcut to the absolute good," and in fact the only evidence that a person is self-related to the highest good is "the absolute difficulty" of the commitment to such a relation.⁵³⁴

There will be obstacles to such commitment, and one of the most pernicious is reason itself, in the mode of mediation. Mediation, according to Climacus, is a kind of "flinching" in which a person, if shrewd, "counts on probabilities" and, if weak, "relies on others" in order to be fully committed.⁵³⁵ When quantitative means are applied to qualitative ends like eternal happiness or ethical certainty, the result is a kind of falsehood. Either form of mediation, Climacus exclaims, "is a wretched invention... it is indeed a forgery by sloth, which nevertheless presumptuously passes itself off also as resignation, which is the most dangerous of all, just as when a thief passes himself off as a policeman."⁵³⁶ One reason that Climacus is so fierce in his attack on mediation is his commitment to genuine selfhood. If the person is to remain a self in the midst of mediation—which, as just noted, is necessary to the dialectic of selfhood—then there must be something involved in the self besides mere mediation.

⁵³³ *CUP*, p. 394/*SKS* 7, p. 359.

⁵³⁴ *CUP*, p. 428/*SKS* 7, p. 390.

⁵³⁵ *CUP*, p. 395/*SKS* 7, p. 360.

⁵³⁶ *CUP*, p. 396/*SKS* 7, p. 361.

But why think this? Might it not be the case that, as the Hegelians claim, the self is constituted precisely in and by the process of mediation? Surely this is the point of the dialectic; it reveals the inner tension in self-consciousness between object and subject that makes selfhood possible by allowing the contrary elements to be stretched to their limits so that their mutual dependence comes to the fore and results in self-reflective awareness. Is this not what Kierkegaard himself does with selfhood, and does questioning mediation not undermine my thesis regarding the dialectical nature of the Kierkegaardian self? The response to these concerns is found, it seems to me, in considering how Kierkegaard describes the role of ‘spirit’ for selfhood. Haufniensis has argued that the self is composed dialectically both of psyche and body and of the temporal and the eternal. These two relations are only constitutive of the self inasmuch as they are sustained by a third, which is spirit. What, then, is spirit?

Self and Spirit

It is not possible within the confines of this project to develop a full account of Kierkegaard’s conception of spirit. As John Davenport notes, the Hegelian idea of spirit or *Geist* that Kierkegaard utilizes refers to a dynamic “animating principle of the body.”⁵³⁷ This animating principle is rooted in the Aristotelian idea of *pneuma*. But Kierkegaard distinguishes ‘spirit’ from ‘soul’ in order to avoid the Hegelian implication that spirit is the necessary outworking of the activity of the soul, as that which the soul will become through its own rational self-conscious activity.⁵³⁸ Accordingly, for Kierkegaard, spirit refers both to the activity of self-relation that

⁵³⁷ Davenport, “Self and ‘Spirit’,” p. 236.

⁵³⁸ Ibid. See also Alastair Hannay, “Spirit and the Idea of the Self as a Reflexive Relation.” *International Kierkegaard Commentary, Vol. 19: The Sickness Unto Death* (Robert L. Perkins, Editor). Macon, GA: Mercer University Press. 1987, p. 23–38.

takes place in the self and, at the same time, the self's relation to the absolute (i.e., God) in which the possibility of individuality arises, which surpasses whatever relations may exist in the machinations of nature or in the logical relations of speculative arguments. In one sense, spirit is self-conscious reflection. But prior to this, spirit is given by the absolute in order for self-conscious reflection to take place. How, then, does Kierkegaard relate these different senses of spirit?

In order to answer this question, I turn to Anti-Climacus's account of selfhood in *The Sickness unto Death*. This text begins with one of Kierkegaard's most infamous passages, an explication of selfhood that must be carefully considered in light of my claims regarding Kierkegaard's metaphysics of possibility. I begin by quoting the key section:

“A human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation's relating itself to itself. A human being is a synthesis... A synthesis is a relation between two. Considered in this way, a human being is still not a self. In the relation between two, the relation is the third as a negative unity, and the two relate to the relation and in the relation to the relation... If, however, the relation relates itself to itself, this relation is the positive third, and this is the self.”⁵³⁹

The first thing to note, other than the tortuous semantic gymnastics, is the expanded definition of selfhood, when compared to the account given in *CA*. Indeed, the differences have been taken by some to be so substantial that they designate a fundamental change in Kierkegaard's conception of selfhood.⁵⁴⁰ Whether or not this is the case, it does appear that his understanding of the self broadens throughout his writings and is better developed, if not complete, by the time that he writes *SUD*. This entails a more fully developed dialectics of selfhood. Anti-Climacus describes three syntheses of the self in addition to Haufniensis's body/psyche duality: finite/infinite,

⁵³⁹ *SUD*, p. 13/*SKS* 11, p. 129.

⁵⁴⁰ Come, for instance, insists that there is a “radical shift” between the views of selfhood put forward in *CA* and *PF*, and the later position put forward in *SUD*. (Come, *Kierkegaard as Humanist*, p. 206.) This seems to me a questionable claim, but I do not have the space to develop it here.

temporal/eternal, and free/necessary.⁵⁴¹ The third is also formulated as possibility/necessity, and this requires further elaboration—a task I will take up later in this chapter.

Presently, however, there is the question of spirit. As Davenport rightly points out, for Kierkegaard the animating principle of spirit is not a Cartesian soul to which the physical body is only contingently related; neither is spirit merely the hylomorphic unity of form and matter. In both of these cases, Anti-Climacus states that the synthesis present is not yet a self.⁵⁴² But if this is right, then we must distinguish between a human being, strictly speaking, and a self. It seems that, on this reading of Kierkegaard, one can be a human being without being a self. This easily leads to equivocation, as Anti-Climacus's language is far less precise than it may initially appear. To begin with, he states that the human being *is* spirit and that spirit *is* self. Therefore, it is not enough to simply say that 'synthesis' is the correct account of a human being but not of a self.⁵⁴³ *Prima facie*, it appears that if synthesis describes the human being then it also describes the self. It is clear, however, that for Kierkegaard to be a self is more than simply to be a human being (even though the dynamic synthesis of selfhood is found precisely in human beings). The synthesis required for genuine selfhood is not 'negative' but 'positive'. And, in line with Haufniensis's account, spirit appears to be the catalyst for this transformation.

Anti-Climacus calls the relation relating to itself a 'positive third'. This describes the situation in which self-reflective spirit initially arises from the interaction between the two poles of the self-as-synthesis. Prior to this, a human being is not a genuine self, but does exhibit the duality that is the starting point for selfhood. Hannay explains: "A 'positive' unity... is one in which the unity is actually supervised by the relation, which then in a sense is the whole in which

⁵⁴¹ *SUD*, p. 13/*SKS* 11, p. 129.

⁵⁴² Davenport, "Self and 'Spirit'," p. 236.

⁵⁴³ *Ibid.* Davenport seems to suggest that such a view is legitimate.

the constituents are contained.”⁵⁴⁴ Arnold Come, by contrast, suggests that when Kierkegaard speaks of a ‘negative third’ he is describing a synthesis that is not yet a self “because there is no *opposition* in it, the relation between psyche and sense is a *negative* unity.”⁵⁴⁵ In other words, the relation that has not yet related itself to itself is not aware of the tension between the poles of the synthesis, and as such is not aware of itself as a self-relation. There is a lack of distance which prevents the self from properly viewing itself as a self. Come argues that this immediacy “blocks the emergence of consciousness of that self which is not yet, blocks the awareness of the task of becoming one’s self.”⁵⁴⁶ The immediacy of the relation prevents the person from truly being a self.

Both of these interpretations have merit. Hannay is correct to say that the unity of the synthesis is supervised by the relation, and Come is right to point out that the supervision is expressed by a reversal of sorts; the ‘positive’ unity of selfhood only takes place when the opposition between poles is upheld completely. In order to truly be a self, the self must recognize both the distance between the poles of the syntheses and the self’s own relation to both of them as contraries, thus recognizing itself to be, as it were, in a state of unbreakable dialectical tension, and that very tension allows the self to be. Spirit is present when both poles are cognizant of, and actively construct, that interrelation, such that the interrelation itself is ‘self-related’. This is consistent with Haufniensis; for him, body and soul (or mind) are two poles that become a synthesis in a human being. But synthesizing the psychological and the biological does not yet constitute a self. Only when spirit relates to itself, that is, becomes aware of itself as spirit—that which, in relating body and soul, is not merely a negative unity but a relation which recognizes and responds to itself as a relation—does it actually become the self.

⁵⁴⁴ *SD*, p. 168, footnote 5.

⁵⁴⁵ Come, *Kierkegaard as Humanist*, p. 7, emphasis in original.

⁵⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

But what does this entail? How, for instance, does the relation actively respond to itself? What possible activity could the relation represent apart from simply relating? It almost appears as though Kierkegaard is trying to express what might be called an ‘emergent’ property of selfhood that takes place in freedom, resulting in a right relation between the poles of the syntheses that make up a person. Spirit, then, would be that which emerges from the syntheses in which the self is formed, and also that which allows the self to emerge from the syntheses. Come rightly asks, “what is the hidden action or behaviour that transforms the relation, in its immediacy, into a ‘positive third’ which is ‘the self’?”⁵⁴⁷ He then answers his own question: “‘relating to itself’ is the freedom, the choosing which the relation gets involved in and which disturbs its immediacy when, out of the *opposition* of finitude and infinitude, there emerges awareness of possibilities which have not yet been actualized in the relation.”⁵⁴⁸ Spirit and freedom have become apparently interchangeable terms.⁵⁴⁹ Spirit is not mandated by the duality to be expressed to any given degree. In other words, every human being potentially has the self-reflective feature of selfhood, but not everyone achieves the same level of selfhood.⁵⁵⁰ This is an expression of spirit’s freedom, or, better, spirit as freedom.

So, Come posits that the relation that relates to itself is “a *description* of an event... in which the relation chooses to become a self that is ‘there’ but only as a possibility which must be actualized... this event breaks the relation open to a new stage or sphere of existence in which the relation becomes a ‘positive third’.”⁵⁵¹ While quibbling a bit with the word ‘description’, I concur with Come’s analysis. The mentioning of possibility brings me to a vital point:

⁵⁴⁷ Come, *Kierkegaard as Humanist*, p. 9.

⁵⁴⁸ Come, p. 10, emphasis in original.

⁵⁴⁹ This could be glossed theologically: where the spirit is, there is freedom. (Cf. 2 Corinthians 3:17.)

⁵⁵⁰ See *SUD*, p. 29/*SKS* 11, p. 145. Davenport notes that the process of becoming a self appears to involve gradation, which suggests that becoming a self is an activity of will. Thus, he says that spirit, for the Kierkegaardian self, is “a capacity for *determined resolve* that unites the agent’s energies.” (Davenport, “Self and ‘Spirit’,” p. 240, emphasis in original.) But this leaves unanswered the question of just how such a capacity arises in the first place.

⁵⁵¹ Come, *Kierkegaard as Humanist*, p. 11, emphasis in original.

possibility, as the expression of spirit's freedom, directs selfhood in a manner that is prior to existential possibility's role as one of the poles in the duality possibility/necessity. In other words, the self-relation exists as possibility in a unique sense, precisely because it is essential that the relation relates itself to itself. In terms of possibility, at the 'meta-level' any relating of the relation must be present as possibility, since the tension between the poles is precisely that out of which a new possibility—namely, the self—emerges.⁵⁵² This takes place (and is taking place) as long as the self-relation is operating in the manner described by Anti-Climacus, and this means the self must exist as possibility in order for the self-relation to take place *at all*. This does not mean, as we will see, that the self can rest in its own possibility. But it is linked to the metaphysical backdrop in which Kierkegaard's inchoate sketch of reality takes shape.

It is generally agreed that the poles of finitude, necessity, and temporality correspond to the 'body' pole of the self, whereas infinitude, possibility, and eternity correspond to the 'soul' or 'psyche' pole.⁵⁵³ The spirit of a particular person is the "dynamic process of ongoing activity" that "determines 'how' the first-order relation," that is, the activity between the various dialectical polarities of the self, will be actualized.⁵⁵⁴ Spirit is also "an ability or power to move between possibility and necessity."⁵⁵⁵ This happens because God 'lets go' of the self, so to speak, and allows it to have freedom.⁵⁵⁶ Thus, Davenport muses, "it is as if God creates the potential for self by allowing a human animal to become free in relation to its given psychological and physical features, to make of them an identity conditioned but not determined by this

⁵⁵² As Theunissen puts it: "In the self possibility is the absolutely primordial, which can neither itself be called actual nor rest on any prior actuality." (Michael Theunissen. "Kierkegaard's Negativistic Method." *Kierkegaard's Truth: The Disclosure of the Self* (Joseph H. Smith, MD, Editor). New Haven, CT/London: Yale University Press, 1981, p. 419.)

⁵⁵³ Davenport, "Self and Spirit," p. 236.

⁵⁵⁴ Davenport, "Self and Spirit," p. 237.

⁵⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁶ *SUD*, p. 16/*SKS* 11, p. 132.

givenness.”⁵⁵⁷ But if God (or the Absolute) ‘gives’ the potential for becoming a self, then the granting of this possibility is the basis of selfhood. In other words, the metaphysical possibility of becoming a self is the true beginning of the entire process.

This is a claim about reality that must not be simply written off as merely figurative, lest the self become nothing more than an illusion.⁵⁵⁸ Anti-Climacus is adamant that the characteristics of selfhood described in *SUD* apply to all human beings. His model of selfhood doesn’t merely figuratively describe the notions of synthesis, freedom, despair, etc.; it assumes their actuality and offers reasons for these assumptions. What’s more, we find that the dialectic of selfhood and the spirit that arises out of that self-reflective synthesis depend on an external source. This clarifies the way in which spirit can be present as both the catalyst and result of the self-relation. Spirit, in the first instance, is the source of the self’s possibility; it inhabits the freedom given by the absolute to the self in the ‘letting go’ of the self to become what it potentially may be. However, we now face a new worry; namely, beginning with this source of possibility appears to short-circuit the dialectical essence of the self. Said differently, does claiming a starting point outside of the dialectical self-relation not contradict the Kierkegaardian model of selfhood I am proposing? Not necessarily. Freedom, I submit, is the essential quality of spirit that is given by God for the becoming of the self. But to show this, I must further examine the freedom of the self.

⁵⁵⁷ Davenport, “Self and Spirit,” p. 238.

⁵⁵⁸ Perhaps what is needed here is a more robust notion of ‘figuration’, which, again, is suggested by Kierkegaard’s comment that all language about spiritual matters is metaphorical (*overført*). (See p. 168, footnote 493.)

Self as Freedom

Freedom, according to Kierkegaard, is God's most valuable gift to humanity.⁵⁵⁹ This freedom is manifested in the decision to choose oneself. I already noted in chapter two that Kierkegaard defines the self as freedom. I now expand the contours of that analysis. Recall that freedom is directly related to self-decision. However, unlike Kant, Kierkegaard does not ground his conception of free decision in a rational axiom, as this would oppose the dialectic of contradiction necessary for selfhood. Freedom requires both the objective and subjective poles of reflective self-consciousness to be held together in a relation of tension that sustains the contradiction. This dialectic of freedom is necessary (though not sufficient) for selfhood because otherwise the self reverts to another kind of necessity, in which the existential journey to selfhood is not simply undercut, but rendered meaningless. Why bother trying to become oneself if the outcome is already determined? Just as Kantian imperatives can never generate genuine ethical activity, neither can selfhood—at least in the Kierkegaardian sense—be generated in a deterministic world.

Like Hegel, Kierkegaard takes freedom to be a primary activity of spirit. To choose oneself in freedom, one must recognize the responsibility of becoming a self and commit oneself to it, knowing this commitment means an eternal process of decision-making in which one continually chooses to be (and to choose) oneself. But how does one go about continually choosing oneself in freedom? Is it an act of will? Must one depend upon external forces for support? From Kierkegaard's perspective, Hegel appears to answer these questions by falling back into a deterministic metaphysical framework. On Hegel's account, one will choose oneself

⁵⁵⁹ *JP 1251/Pap VII 1 A 181, n.d., 1846.*

in freedom precisely because it is necessary and right for spirit to do so.⁵⁶⁰ For Hegel, says Houlgate, “Becoming aware of the true character of human existence... means learning that what we are is the process of producing and determining ourselves.”⁵⁶¹ However, this process has a very definitive logical form: “this process of self-production is itself the process of coming to *understand* more clearly that we are self-producing beings... [it is] through changes in our self-understanding that we actually make ourselves into and so *become* something new.”⁵⁶²

In this way, self-knowledge culminates in freedom: “We are genuinely freed to our human possibilities, for Hegel, only when we know who or what we truly are, when we recognize that we are free, self-determining, historical beings and when we understand fully the form that our freedom must *necessarily* take if it is to be a real freedom.”⁵⁶³ Note, however, that this freedom is necessitated by logic, which is precisely the point at which Kierkegaard diverges from what is initially a fairly Hegelian account of selfhood. In contrast, Kierkegaard’s self remains radically free at a fundamental level. As Clare Carlisle notes, “for Kierkegaard inward freedom is synonymous with selfhood.”⁵⁶⁴ But is ‘inward’ freedom an existential or an ontological concept? Kierkegaard’s metaphysics of possibility offers clarity to this vision of freedom. Recall that possibility, broadly conceived, involves all the different options that may be available to an individual. The key difference between the Hegelian and Kierkegaardian accounts of selfhood is whether these options are grounded in radical necessity—the so-called ‘absolute possibility’ that Kierkegaard rejects—or radical freedom, in that our possibilities as selves are grounded in a necessary absolute that nevertheless does not impose on our existential freedom.

⁵⁶⁰ “In the *concept*, therefore, the kingdom of *freedom* is disclosed. The concept is free because the *identity that exists in and for itself* and constitutes the necessity of substance exists at the same time as sublated or as *positedness*, and this positedness, as self-referring, is that very identity.” (SL, p. 509, emphasis in original.)

⁵⁶¹ Houlgate, p. 21.

⁵⁶² Ibid, emphasis in original.

⁵⁶³ Houlgate, p. 22, emphasis in original.

⁵⁶⁴ Carlisle, p. 29.

Without the help of this absolute (God), human beings will never remain absolutely committed to the activity of self-groundedness. If we, as selves, recognize our capacity to be other than we are, then we also become aware of our inability to fully actualize that otherness. Several possible responses follow from this. We might try to change our situation, or ourselves, in an attempt to more fully actualize what we lack. These attempts may be active—i.e., I try to make myself a better person in some way—or passive—I try to convince myself that there is, in fact, no problem. Or, we might assert that our mere ability to do *something* is enough for a meaningful existence. But for Kierkegaard all these endeavors ultimately lead to despair, since there is never a point at which the actualization of our possibility is complete. Kierkegaard's view is that only by admitting our deficiency, while at the same time having faith in the 'impossible possibility' of the absolute God, can we overcome the despair that is incipient to human dialectical existence. I will consider these claims further in chapter five.

Possibility, Freedom, and Despair

For now, there is still the issue of Anti-Climacus's perceived equivocation; at times he places freedom and necessity as opposite poles in the synthesis, at other times possibility and necessity. But, as we have seen, freedom and possibility are not synonymous terms. Is this simply a case of imprecision on Kierkegaard's part? I think that, to some degree, his dialectic of freedom and possibility remains incomplete. After all, he was not in the business of systematically developing either term. Perhaps we can say that freedom is possibility inflected intentionally, that freedom has an agential quality not necessarily present in possibility. Freedom and possibility remain irreducible to one another; however, as they are intertwined and

multilayered concepts it becomes difficult, perhaps impossible, to cleanly disconnect one from the other. Now, it is clear that possibility is fundamental to the Kierkegaardian self.⁵⁶⁵ And, with respect to the self, it is existential freedom that primarily concerns Kierkegaard. However, in *SUD*, we find the discussion of possibility in both existential and metaphysical terms, and these can easily become confused if we are not careful. Indeed, it is perhaps fair to say that Anti-Climacus himself, at times, confuses terms.⁵⁶⁶

This confusion is then perpetuated by Kierkegaard's commentators. For instance, according to Come, the imagination is the source of the quality of infinitude in the Kierkegaardian self, and this infinitude presents itself as possibility.⁵⁶⁷ And, he says, "In the gap between the 'possibility' of imagination and the actuality of existence, 'freedom' must occur."⁵⁶⁸ Thus, "freedom is something in addition to possibility and thus is not the opposite of necessity. Possibility is a more fundamental constituent of human nature that makes itself felt prior to freedom and its task."⁵⁶⁹ In the movement of possibility to actuality "the stage is set for the 'qualitative leap' of freedom, by which that which already *is* as a potentiality becomes an actuality, comes-into-existence."⁵⁷⁰ The leap does not merely remain operative as the interaction between two poles, but is itself the catalyst or incentive for those poles to interact. In other words, the leap describes the 'how' of the action rather than the 'what'. Kierkegaard's 'leaps' are beyond mere reason: the 'how' is always inexplicable from the standpoint of the 'what'.

⁵⁶⁵ As Anti-Climacus puts it, "To lack possibility means either that everything has become necessary for a person or that everything has become trivial." (*SUD*, p. 40/*SKS* 11, p. 154.)

⁵⁶⁶ For instance, when he claims that in possibility, "everything is possible," Anti-Climacus may be referring to metaphysical possibility; however, in the context of his discussion of selfhood and despair, it is more likely that he is referring to existential possibility that is mistaken for metaphysical possibility. (*SUD*, p. 37/*SKS* 11, p. 151.) This is part of what it is to be in despair: one confuses categories and has misunderstood what it is to be a self in the first place. Anti-Climacus's terminology reveals the difficulty in precisely expressing these ideas.

⁵⁶⁷ Come, *Kierkegaard as Humanist*, p. 36ff.

⁵⁶⁸ Come, *Kierkegaard as Humanist*, p. 43.

⁵⁶⁹ *Ibid.* I am not sure whether it is right to say that possibility is *felt prior to freedom*. It is reasonable to claim that possibility is present as a feature of the self both logically and temporally prior to freedom, but it remains unclear whether or not the self is existentially aware of its possibility prior to its freedom.

⁵⁷⁰ Come, p. 49, emphasis in original.

With all of this, I agree. Freedom comes out of an ambiguous background, and that realization leads to angst over one's self-becoming. At the same time, this angst provides the possibility for the individual to choose herself again through repetition, and this choice furthers both freedom and selfhood, as the dialectical self-relation continues to develop. Unfortunately, Come equivocates and even appears to conflate terms when he says elsewhere that possibility "becomes freedom."⁵⁷¹ Plainly, if possibility is the presence of the choice, and freedom the means by which the choice is made, then it seems incorrect to say that possibility becomes freedom. If possibility became freedom, it would confuse both concepts, granting the 'how' and the 'what' the same status. So, Come's analysis seems to be mistaken on this key point.⁵⁷² Freedom and possibility are closely related, but they are not the same. This being the case, we are better positioned to understand Anti-Climacus's apparent equivocation about necessity. It is only equivocation if we fail to keep Kierkegaard's multivalent metaphysics in mind. Once we distinguish between absolute, metaphysical, and existential possibility, we also become aware of the corresponding levels of necessity about which we must be concerned.

It is also questionable whether we, as human beings, are epistemologically capable of properly understanding our freedom in the first place. Haufniensis tells us that freedom is 'entangled' (*hildet*: snared/prejudiced) in human beings.⁵⁷³ This entanglement leads to the inexplicable decision to sin. But, according to Kierkegaard, this is the situation in which all human beings find themselves. Anti-Climacus calls it despair: "Despair is the misrelation in the relation of a synthesis that relates itself to itself."⁵⁷⁴ "But," he continues, "the synthesis is not the

⁵⁷¹ Come, p. 115.

⁵⁷² Come rightly says, though, that freedom is "something more, something *other* than the openness of human imaginative infinitude to being possible. Freedom is not a determinant or quality. It is something that happens, it is an event, or as Kierkegaard likes to say, it is 'sudden'." (Come, p. 137, emphasis in original.)

⁵⁷³ CA, p. 49ff/SKS 4, p. 354ff.

⁵⁷⁴ SUD, p. 15/SKS 11, p. 131.

misrelation... If the synthesis were the misrelation, then despair would not exist at all, then despair would be something that lies in human nature as such.”⁵⁷⁵ Said differently, on a naturalistic view of things, we simply are what we are by virtue of the laws of physics, and ‘despair’ is an irrational response to the sheer determined contingency of our existence. The unspoken assumption is that, since our lives are physically determined, we should accept our lot and merely modify our circumstances so that our lives contain as much temporal fulfillment as we can provide for ourselves.⁵⁷⁶ There is a commitment to making things ‘better’ in a utilitarian sense, not to actually *changing ourselves* at a fundamental ontological level, since our being is nothing more than the particular collections of subatomic particles that have been physically bound together so as to give us our biological existence.

Here we have the crux of the free will dilemma for Kierkegaard. Initially, the dilemma appears as the self’s anxiety about freedom per se. But, reflectively, the philosophical *and* existential question (for the two quickly merge in any discussion of freedom) becomes: is there any ontological actuality to the self-becoming of the individual, or are all decisions, in spite of the illusion of freedom, nothing more than determinations that result from the unfolding of the physical universe?⁵⁷⁷ In terms of possibility, are ‘possibilities’ merely nominally useful fictions that describe nothing more than quantitative operations, or do they refer to genuine existential (and, correlatively, metaphysical) movements of being? Proponents of compatibilism or libertarian freedom need not necessarily be theists, but they should resonate philosophically with Kierkegaard’s view, which suggests that the very fact that we try so hard as human beings to change our circumstances, and our responses to those circumstances, reflects the reality of our recognition that we do in fact have some ability to change ourselves by virtue of our free actions.

⁵⁷⁵ *SUD*, p. 15-16/*SKS* 11, p. 131.

⁵⁷⁶ This may be why some non-theists argue that religious believers are psychologically pessimistic or masochistic.

⁵⁷⁷ This question can also be framed theologically, in terms of divine predestination.

We *try* to change ourselves because in some sense we *can*.

There remains, however, the problem of despair. Anti-Climacus traces this directly back to the source: “Where, then, does the despair come from? From the relation in which the synthesis relates itself to itself, inasmuch as God, who constituted man a relation, releases it from his hand, as it were—that is, inasmuch as the relation relates itself to itself. And because the relation is spirit, is the self, upon it rests the responsibility for all despair at every moment of its existence.”⁵⁷⁸ Despair is a (non-necessary) result of selfhood. Perhaps, then, the picture of God ‘letting go’ of creation as relinquishing a perfect balance that is then immediately corrupted by human despairing is not quite right. Instead, in creating all that is with an element of elasticity or play, God provides the very possibility of the relation’s relating itself to itself at the outcome of the possibility inherent in the creation. It is not that God establishes a relation that is perfectly balanced and then lets it go, resulting in a misrelation, but rather that God allows a kind of freedom to inhere within the creation, and this freedom allows for the genuinely free self-relational decisions that constitute human beings.⁵⁷⁹

This does not imply that the human being lacks accountability, as it is still the case that each person is responsible for their own inscrutable decision to choose despair. Anti-Climacus states this clearly:

“Every actual moment of despair is traceable to possibility; every moment he is in despair he *is bringing* it upon himself. It is always the present tense... in every actual moment of despair the person in despair bears all the past as a present in possibility. The reason for this is that to despair is a qualification of spirit and relates to the eternal in man. But he cannot rid himself of the eternal—no, never in all eternity.”⁵⁸⁰

⁵⁷⁸ *SUD*, p. 16/*SKS* 11, p. 132.

⁵⁷⁹ At the same time, God interacts with the ‘fallen’ creation in various ways, one of which involves the ordering of the human self-relation, not merely as something perfect that went wrong, but as something that was already good precisely in the fact that it contained the possibility that it might go wrong. Indeed, the element of possibility in creation offers the opportunity for greater actualization of goodness as well as corruption, though corruption is what resulted. This was not beyond God's control, for God already knew what God would do in any case—God would become a human being and redeem creation.

⁵⁸⁰ *SUD*, p. 17/*SKS* 11, p. 132-33, emphasis in original.

He continues, “despair is not attributable to the misrelation but to the relation that relates itself to itself. A person cannot rid himself of the relation to himself any more than he can rid himself of his self, which, after all, is one and the same thing.”⁵⁸¹ But how can this be, if God has created the world, and the relation that is the possible self, with the possibility of despair in the first place?

Anti-Climacus’s statement that God ‘constitutes man a relation’ initially appears to describe a situation in which no imbalance exists, prior to God’s letting the relation go. But this explanation is incomplete: the relation that God constitutes is, it would seem, a synthesis that has the metaphysical possibility of becoming a self. The letting go of the relation is the gift of freedom in which that relation is given not just metaphysical, but existential, possibility. This seems to imply that the possibility of despair actually comes into being alongside freedom, and thus it is not fundamental to the relation itself, but given to the relation in freedom. The gift of freedom, in other words, is a double-edged sword: with every moment of freedom, there is also the possibility of misusing that freedom, and to the extent that freedom is misused, despair is the outcome.⁵⁸² This is not inevitable; there is no necessity that a self be or remain in despair. Anti-Climacus states, “every moment that a self exists, it is in a process of becoming, for the self *κατὰ δύναμιν* [in potentiality] does not actually exist, is simply that which ought to come into existence.”⁵⁸³ But insofar as the self fails to become what it ought to become in freedom, it is in despair.

There are two ways this despair may take shape. The first is ‘despair of possibility’—the desire to live completely in possibility, closing off any relation to actuality whatsoever. This

⁵⁸¹ Ibid.

⁵⁸² Beabout’s *Freedom and its Misuses* is helpful on this point.

⁵⁸³ *SUD*, p. 30/*SKS* 11, p. 146.

closure stems from an awareness of the inevitable finality and frailty of actual existence, which makes the person despair over the pain of ‘really living’. Consequently, the person retreats into the possible, which offers the illusion of comfort and safety. This is, I suspect, a common experience; it happens any time a person prefers a false reality to the true one.⁵⁸⁴ How does the despair of possibility take place? By imagination: “Imagination is infinitizing reflection... the self is reflection, and the imagination is reflection, is the rendition of the self as the self’s possibility. The imagination is the possibility of any and all reflection, and the intensity of this medium is the possibility of the intensity of the self.”⁵⁸⁵ The imagination, as the medium for possibility in the self, is also crucial to self-becoming, but when it is motivated by despair it becomes “that which leads a person out into the infinite in such a way that it only leads him away from himself and thereby prevents him from coming back to himself.”⁵⁸⁶

In the despair of possibility, a person loses himself or herself more and more in an abstraction of who they might be, rather than choosing to become the person they really are. This may eventually lead to a complete forgetting of oneself, which is replaced by a false, ‘fantastic’ self: “When feeling or knowing or willing has become fantastic, the entire self can eventually become that, whether in the more active form of plunging headlong into fantasy or the more passive form of being carried away.”⁵⁸⁷ Said differently, “possibility seems greater and greater to the self; more and more it becomes possible because nothing becomes actual. Eventually everything seems possible, but this is exactly the point at which the abyss swallows up the self.”⁵⁸⁸ This is why “The greatest hazard of all, losing the self, can occur very quietly in the

⁵⁸⁴ As an extreme example, think of the character Cypher in the movie “The Matrix” who betrays his fellow insurgents because his desire for the false, but pleasurable, virtual world of the matrix overpowers his willingness to fight against the machines that control the real world.

⁵⁸⁵ *SUD*, p. 31/*SKS* 11, p. 147.

⁵⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸⁷ *SUD*, p. 32/*SKS* 11, p. 148.

⁵⁸⁸ *SUD*, p. 36/*SKS* 11, p. 151.

world, as if it were nothing at all.”⁵⁸⁹

Of course, the opposite type of despair—the ‘despair of necessity’—is such as much of a threat to the self, perhaps even more so. It rids the self of all existential possibility. This despair essentially declares: ‘The machinations of the material world constitute whatever possibilities exist’. Thus, a person who inhabits the despair of necessity lives in a state of resignation, perhaps even fatalism or nihilism, where there is little reason to hope, since the hoped-for has been given up for the sake of realistic or pragmatic concerns. The great danger here is that despair will turn into defiance. For, in the despair of necessity, one seems to be forced into a position where possibility has to be continually rejected. This, ironically, involves a kind of possibility. Anti-Climacus explains, “Fatalism and determinism, however, do have sufficient imagination to despair of possibility, sufficient possibility to discover impossibility.”⁵⁹⁰ What they lack, however, is the “possibility for the... tempering of necessity, and thus lack possibility as mitigation.”⁵⁹¹

Having rejected this tempering, the person who defiantly “in despair wills to be himself”⁵⁹² refuses to listen to any other possibility, including the possibility of faith: “he takes it as an occasion to be offended at all existence... Hope in the possibility of help, especially by virtue of the absurd, that for God everything is possible—no, that he does not want... Rather than to seek help, he prefers, if necessary, to be himself with all the agonies of hell.”⁵⁹³ If taken to its most extreme point, this type of despair becomes what Kierkegaard calls the ‘demonic’; that is, the despair that wills to be itself out of spite and hatred for the world and his or her own involvement in it. In a heartbreakingly bleak analogy, Kierkegaard writes: “it is as if an error

⁵⁸⁹ *SUD*, p. 32-33/*SKS* 11, p. 148.

⁵⁹⁰ *SUD*, p. 41/*SKS* 11, p. 156.

⁵⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹² *SUD*, p. 67ff/*SKS* 11, p. 181ff.

⁵⁹³ *SUD*, p. 71/*SKS* 11, p. 185.

slipped into an author's writing and the error became conscious of itself as an error—perhaps it actually was not a mistake but in a much higher sense an essential part of the whole production—and now this error wants to mutiny against the author, out of hatred toward him, forbidding him to correct it and in maniacal defiance saying to him: No, I refuse to be erased; I will stand as a witness against you, a witness that you are a second-rate author.”⁵⁹⁴

Against these forms of despair, Kierkegaard offers the possibility of faith. Faith, particularly religious faith, is the antidote, not only to the despair depicted in *SUD*, but to all of the spiritual misrelations with which Kierkegaard is concerned. Faith, says Kierkegaard, believes that “everywhere and at every moment there is an absolute *beginning*.”⁵⁹⁵ This ‘beginning’ denotes the overcoming of despair via the activity of the God for whom all things are possible. Faith is the sphere of existence wherein the individual is committed to the unfolding of this new reality. For the self, this entails the trust that, no matter what the circumstances may be, there is the possibility of becoming the self one imagines (assuming that one is imagining genuine selfhood rather than a false self). The self does not need to hide in the despair of possibility or defiantly stand in the despair of necessity. Instead, the self can be confident of its own possibility becoming actuality as it rests, by faith, transparently in the ground that establishes it.

But is there any reason to believe that the self will accomplish this task? It is, indeed, a two-sided task, corresponding to two primary claims. The first claim is that despair is unavoidable without God, and the task of the self is to recognize this situation and honestly accept it. But this is a contentious claim, and one that many scholars have rejected outright, since it seems intuitively unreasonable to say that all human beings are suffering from despair. But

⁵⁹⁴ *SUD*, p. 74/*SKS* 11, p. 187.

⁵⁹⁵ *JP* 1136/*Pap* X 2 A 371, *n.d.*, 1850, emphasis in original.

Anti-Climacus insists that despair is a universal human trait.⁵⁹⁶ This is because despair is not merely a psychological problem but a spiritual one as well ('spirit' may be defined according to the terms outlined above). The second claim is that faith in God is the only means by which the self can truly overcome despair and become itself. This, too, is highly contentious. So much so, in fact, that many commentators have taken Kierkegaard's psychological and existential analyses to heart while at the same time jettisoning the explicitly Christian theological underpinnings of those analyses. Faith, it is claimed, may refer to any attitude of trust that takes place with the infinite passion required by an eternal commitment, and this is sufficient to qualify as the ground in which selfhood may be established.⁵⁹⁷

Davenport and Rudd on the Self

I am not concerned at this point with whether such a move is legitimate in principle or not. Rather, I want to examine what this sort of approach implies for selfhood. In order to clarify what is at stake, I will now briefly interact with John Davenport and Anthony Rudd. Using what I take to be limitations in their work, I hope to show further how the freedom of the self operates for Kierkegaard. I begin with Davenport's assertion that "persons 'exist' in a different way than any mere object... since persons are always aware of future possibilities and restrictions on their options arising from their situation and their past."⁵⁹⁸ We are drawn once again to the interaction between possibility and freedom. Davenport rightly notes that freedom is not exclusively tied to possibility; in fact, "the kind of freedom that Anti-Climacus equates with selfhood transcends

⁵⁹⁶ *SUD*, p. 22ff/*SKS* 11, p. 138.

⁵⁹⁷ See my critique of Kosch's and Stack's views in chapter five.

⁵⁹⁸ Davenport, "Selfhood and Spirit," p. 232.

both poles.”⁵⁹⁹ But we are still left with the question of how this takes place—just what is it about freedom that enables spirit to actualize its self-relation, so that the possible self may become itself?

Davenport argues that the freedom of spirit is not the possibility of the self *per se*: the self does have a *telos*, according to Kierkegaard. To say otherwise is to be confused about the ‘power’ that establishes the self.⁶⁰⁰ Anti-Climacus is clear that any misrelation in the self is fundamentally a misrelation between the self and this establishing power.⁶⁰¹ If that were the case, then to say that the self is established by its own possibility is to say that all misrelations fundamentally reside within the self. The project is then how one might become a self that is no longer misrelated to itself. But this creates an epistemological problem: how does the self, whose only establishing power is itself, know whether it is misrelated to itself or not? On what basis can it make such a determination? It would seem that only by virtue of some external standard or guide can any determination about the self’s proper relation to itself be maintained. Otherwise, we are left with a situation wherein self-relations are entirely subjective, and it is up to the individual to intuitively determine whether their own self-relation is proper or improper. This appears, at least, to be a logical regress. We have no justifiable reason to conclude that any self is a genuine self, and Kierkegaard’s project is an exercise in futility. This is the extreme Sartrean path, and it has been rightly abandoned.⁶⁰²

Davenport suggests a different approach. He states, “the movement of spirit provides the basis for all one’s more derivative attitudes and emotions towards values in actual and possible

⁵⁹⁹ Davenport, p. 238.

⁶⁰⁰ Davenport, p. 239.

⁶⁰¹ *SUD*, p. 16/*SKS* 11, p. 132.

⁶⁰² Edward Mooney sums this up succinctly: “Self-choice is *not* radical Sartrean choice.” (Edward Mooney. *Selves in Discord and Resolve: Kierkegaard’s Moral-Religious Psychology from Either/Or to Sickness Unto Death*. New York/London: Routledge, 1996, p. 16, emphasis in original.)

events in life... spirit is motive-shaping will that has as its *telos* a unified stance towards life.”⁶⁰³ Davenport admits that most attempts to develop this unified stance will be unsuccessful (hence the ubiquity of despair). He recognizes, with Judge William, that selfhood can only arise if the person gazes inwardly and organizes their possibilities and actualities in such a way that they form a whole life-view, “a *self-forming* choice.”⁶⁰⁴ Davenport admits that selves who attempt such self-forming choices will, on Kierkegaard’s view, typically fail to genuinely become selves because they will be “divided” and “dispersed” in various interpersonal relationships.⁶⁰⁵ Whether part of a mob, or attempting to find themselves in other people, such selves do not remain singularly focused on the establishing power, and are thus not unified, genuine selves.

Davenport then turns to the ‘religious’ self. He states that for Anti-Climacus to be a self ‘before God’ is “to live in a volitional commitment that is unreserved, standing for something as defining one’s whole identity, being willing to submit this identity to eternal judgement, which finalizes us eternally as the self we have become in life.”⁶⁰⁶ This is not a relationship of cognition; it does not imply that one ‘knows’ they are in a relationship with God. Rather, it is “a shift in attitude that regestalts our ethical consciousness.”⁶⁰⁷ Davenport suggests that religious faith is the best example of this ‘self-shaping’, in that one’s identity “accords with the transcendental ground of its being.”⁶⁰⁸ But what does this mean? Is it really possible to maintain such a shift in attitude? Does this sort of self-shaping not require a person to be constantly and deeply connected to the transcendental ground? How might this be achieved? What kind of ‘volitional commitment’ or ‘ethical consciousness’ is required for the self to maintain the self-

⁶⁰³ Davenport, p. 240.

⁶⁰⁴ Davenport, p. 241, emphasis in original.

⁶⁰⁵ Davenport, p. 245.

⁶⁰⁶ Ibid, see *SUD*, p. 27-28.

⁶⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁸ Ibid.

shaping that is necessary for its own becoming?

Anthony Rudd, in his recent book, *Self, Value, and Narrative: A Kierkegaardian Approach*, argues that genuine self-becoming is found in a mix of “self-shaping” and “self-acceptance.”⁶⁰⁹ While we do not literally create ourselves at will, there is a sense in which we must form our intentions as we respond to stimuli and experiences. Although the self is always divided in various ways, it can nevertheless make genuine movements that involve the decision to respond in ways that are self-forming in a psychological manner. Rudd notes that “more extreme versions of the self-creation idea seem inescapably paradoxical, for the self would surely need to exist already in order to bring itself into existence.”⁶¹⁰ The issue, then, is equilibrium: what is the proper balance between self-shaping and self-acceptance? Clearly, we should not readily accept everything about ourselves; this would lead to imbalanced or narcissistic behavior. On the other hand, to commit to radical self-shaping seems naïve and logically problematic, since none of us can fully create the selves we would like to be.

Rudd argues that balance is found in a “Platonic teleology” that he finds present in Kierkegaard’s work.⁶¹¹ This involves a fundamental relation to the Good as the ultimate source of our fulfillment.⁶¹² Self-shaping and self-acceptance are united in the self-relating synthesis of selfhood as the self becomes itself; that is, we are already in some sense selves as human beings, but we are imperfect selves, and so “selfhood is presented as an ideal to be attained; it is our *telos*, not our current state.”⁶¹³ At the same time, however, “because the stable synthesis is our

⁶⁰⁹ Anthony Rudd. *Self, Value, and Narrative: A Kierkegaardian Approach*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 16.

⁶¹⁰ Rudd, p. 13.

⁶¹¹ Rudd, p. 26.

⁶¹² Rudd admits that he is “abstracting to some extent from Kierkegaard’s own more specific philosophical and theological commitments.” (Rudd, p. 40.)

⁶¹³ Rudd, p. 42.

telos, what we should be, we cannot find satisfaction in these inadequate syntheses.”⁶¹⁴ A proper balance of self-shaping and self-accepting can only take place if the self is directed toward something else: “the self can only hold its own potentially conflicting elements together if it has something at which to aim, or to which it is committed.”⁶¹⁵ This, states Rudd, is a secondary *telos* that is required for the primary *telos* of balanced selfhood to take place.

And what is the ‘something’ toward which the potentially unified self must be aimed? Rudd distinguishes between ‘minimal’ and ‘rich’ secondary teleologies, suggesting that the first requires only that there is something ‘significant’ outside the self that is “significant because the self has chosen to will it.”⁶¹⁶ A rich teleology demands that the self is related to something specific, which enables the self to genuinely become itself. It is not merely something the self desires, but the self desires it because it has the capacity to bring about genuine selfhood.⁶¹⁷ Rudd claims that the rich teleology is Kierkegaardian, and this seems right to me. As I noted in chapter two, the self cannot be committed to evil activity if it is to become a true self; presumably the same applies to a minimal teleology in which the self’s commitment is to a relative or imperfect good: one should not expect an eternal commitment to be maintained in such a context.

Rudd’s proposal, however, faces the same epistemological problem raised above, in that it apparently assumes that the imbalanced, incomplete self is nevertheless unified enough to correctly decide upon its own significant teleological object. But why assume this? That is, whether applying a minimal or a rich teleology to the self, Rudd expects the self to be able to rightly ascertain and choose what its highest good really is. And how does the self decide this? It

⁶¹⁴ Ibid.

⁶¹⁵ Rudd, p. 43.

⁶¹⁶ Rudd, p. 44.

⁶¹⁷ Rudd, p. 45.

is true that Kierkegaard may be called a Platonist to the extent that he identifies the Good with God, who is ‘Goodness’ itself. Rudd admits this, but does not commit himself to this view. But is it enough to say, with Rudd, that Kierkegaardian selfhood is genuinely achieved in the commitment to “an objective, normative standard (or perhaps coherent set of standards) to which we need to relate in order to achieve harmony with ourselves?”⁶¹⁸ That is, does Rudd’s account, as it stands, remain too minimal? Rudd admits that Kierkegaard’s actual view is much more robust, and centers on the God of Christianity.⁶¹⁹ He likewise notes that “only relating to what is in fact of worth can bring real fulfillment.”⁶²⁰

So, there is an existential-metaphysical question that must be resolved; namely, can the self choose—and in so doing, indirectly bring about—such a relation in its own power, or is this self-relation ultimately beyond the self’s control? Rudd attempts to resolve this issue via value realism, the claim that objective ethical values really do exist. Hence, there is such a thing as the Good.⁶²¹ He argues, in a manner similar to Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms, that the fact that we assume there are real values—that some things are right and some things are wrong, and we judge people’s actions accordingly—implies that these values really must exist. To say that ethical values are merely psychological runs the risk of collapsing into self-contradiction, and since we all intuitively strive to avoid such contradictions, this suggests that values are not merely psychological.⁶²² Rudd further states, “There are intrinsically valuable things in reality, and they make objectively valid demands on us to behave in ways that are appropriate to their

⁶¹⁸ Rudd, p. 46.

⁶¹⁹ Ibid.

⁶²⁰ Rudd, p. 48.

⁶²¹ Rudd, p. 92ff.

⁶²² “As someone who is inescapably an evaluator, I cannot but regard my evaluations as attempts to *get things right*... I cannot, from the perspective of personal agency, suppose that I am necessarily a being that makes evaluations, and also believe that there are no objective values, and therefore that those evaluations are incapable of being correct or incorrect.” (Rudd, p. 95.)

value.”⁶²³ These, he asserts, are goods, or the Good in various forms, and it is to these that the self must orient its self-shaping and self-acceptance in order to be grounded in the proper object that provides the capacity for genuine selfhood to emerge.

But, supposing that Rudd is correct about objective values, what do his claims entail? It is one thing to say that there are objective ethical values, it is quite another to claim that we know how to properly relate ourselves to those values. Did Kierkegaard really accept that selfhood is grounded in the Good, or some other general principle? Rudd is surely right to point out that our values are reflected in our activity, but the kind of self-relation that is required for genuine selfhood appears to be more than simply a desire for something good, or even for the Good itself, that is reflected in our activities to a greater or lesser extent. Rudd realizes that his view seems to require a basic optimism about the inherent human “natural attunement to the Good.”⁶²⁴ This is in stark contrast to Kierkegaard’s own view of human nature. Rudd suggests that a better way to approach the Good is by keeping in mind Kierkegaard’s idea of synthesis: “on a Kierkegaardian view, there is great value in being a ‘synthesis’ of the finite and the infinite. The good for us is to appreciate the Good in the way *we* can—and this means, at least in the first place, as it manifests or expresses itself in particulars.”⁶²⁵

None of this, however, explains why we should think that, as human beings, we will succeed in this task. Indeed, I think Kierkegaard’s point is precisely that we cannot, since our ‘attunement’ to the Good is subject to severe limitations. This could easily lead to despair, which would be a problem for Kierkegaard (he would, arguably, be in despair too) *unless* the despairing person is willing to remain open to the metaphysical possibility of God. Rudd, for his part, hints at the need for a metaphysically robust account of the Good that makes possible not only a

⁶²³ Rudd, p. 126.

⁶²⁴ Rudd, p. 131.

⁶²⁵ Rudd, p. 133-34, emphasis in original.

reasonable acceptance of the teleological account of selfhood he has proposed, but also brings us closer to a Kierkegaardian view. It seems to me that an epistemological question and its concomitant metaphysical concern remain, however, because these proposals rely on the ability of the self to ‘recognize’ and ‘harmonize’ its own insufficiencies. But this ability is precisely what Kierkegaard seems to reject.⁶²⁶ Thus, any commitment to a Platonic Good, whether weak or strong, must provide an account of how that Good gives to human selves the capacity to know and receive the Good, or at least must admit that such a capacity is a necessary feature of the Kierkegaardian self, though there may be no rational account of how this feature operates. If not, then we are left with a self that does not need to be grounded in an Absolute. This is not only contrary to Kierkegaard, it also goes against the views that Davenport and Rudd purport to hold.

Where does this leave us? It seems reasonable, on the metaphysics of possibility I have outlined, to say that Kierkegaard agreed with the idea of objective values. But these values are not directly accessible to us as human beings; they must be encountered in passionate existential commitments, and this requires a source in which such commitments are maintained. This does not appear to be something that we can accomplish in our own power. Even if we take into account the unique potentiality of each person, it is not enough to simply have faith in that potentiality. It is certainly true that “‘faithfulness to oneself’ is faithfulness to our God-given vocation” and that we must believe in our “distinctive purpose” and humbly seek to discover it.⁶²⁷ But none of this matters in the end if there is not a source of vocation and purpose beyond ourselves. It is not enough to theorize about a source; this source really must be capable of

⁶²⁶ As Kierkegaard (anticipating *SUD*) states in the *Journals*: “the human being as spirit simply cannot have equilibrium in himself. He is, as the composite (the synthesis), a relation, but a relation which relates itself to itself. Yet he has not established himself as a relation; the relation which he is, even though a relation for itself, is established by another. Only by the relation to this other can he be in equilibrium.” (*JP* 749/*Pap* VIII 2 B 168:6, *n.d.*, 1848.) Cf. *SUD*, p. 30/*SKS* 11, p. 146.

⁶²⁷ Davenport, p. 246.

providing us with the capacity to self-relate as selves. This is where, it seems to me, Rudd's analysis, though insightful, is incomplete. All ethical and religious attempts to establish oneself by striving to live authentically—valuable though they may be—ultimately come to naught if they are based upon an unreliable source. Everything depends on the source.⁶²⁸

The 'Grounding' of Selfhood

Clearly, for Kierkegaard, the source of selfhood must be the God for whom all things are possible. Without God, the self remains ensnared in despair. All our attempts to fix, ignore, or remove despair are, unwittingly, themselves forms of despair, as they represent an unwillingness to face the depth of our inability and the power of God's possibility. Kierkegaard's focus on the human failure to achieve selfhood is connected to 'sin', which Anti-Climacus says is synonymous with despair.⁶²⁹ As Mark Taylor puts it, "The absolute and qualitative difference between God and self renders impossible any immanent relation between the divine and the human. Left to himself, the sinful individual cannot establish the absolute relation to the absolute upon which authentic selfhood depends. Here the self is brought to the utmost extremity where 'humanly speaking no possibility exists'."⁶³⁰ Anti-Climacus makes this point in more radical terms: "At this point, then, salvation is, humanly speaking, utterly impossible; but for God everything is possible! This is the battle of *faith*, battling, madly, if you will, for possibility,

⁶²⁸ This argument is suggested throughout the *Fragments*. We find a similar concern present in the discourse 'To Need God is a Human Being's Highest Perfection' where Kierkegaard asks: "What then is a human being... Has he no power? Is he himself capable of nothing? And what might this power be? What is the highest he is capable of willing?" (*EUD*, p. 307/*SKS* 5, p. 300.) Kierkegaard answers these questions by describing the battle of the self against itself: "Behold him now. His powerful figure is held in the embrace of another figure. They hold each other so tightly all around... that the bout cannot even begin, since, if it did, that other figure would overwhelm him in that very moment—yet that other figure is himself. Thus he is capable of nothing." (*EUD*, p. 309/*SKS* 5, p. 302.)

⁶²⁹ *SUD*, p. 74ff/*SKS* 11, p. 189ff.

⁶³⁰ Taylor, p. 256.

because possibility is the only salvation.”⁶³¹

This ‘battle’ is only winnable with God, because only for God are all things possible. Although Anti-Climacus admits that “the ingeniousness of the human imagination can extend to the point of creating possibility,” he is equally committed to the idea that “when it depends upon *faith*—then only this helps: that for God everything is possible.”⁶³² Possibility, then, is not only the beginning point for the self, it is also the culmination of selfhood, inasmuch as the self only finds its completion in the possibility of God. It is faith that provides the “ever infallible antidote for despair—possibility.”⁶³³ Thus Anti-Climacus can say that “possibility is for the self what oxygen is for breathing.”⁶³⁴ For Kierkegaard, to lack possibility is to lack a self, and to lack God is to lack possibility. The fatalists and determinists who lack God consequently lack selfhood, and despair is the result.⁶³⁵ We are left either needing a metaphysical ground or admitting that our selfhood is groundless. If we rule out Sartrean existentialism (and crude naturalism), on what basis can we claim that the self exists? This is the question that those commentators who reject God must inevitably ask. I will consider this further in the next chapter, when the self’s possibility is examined in more detail.

So, the self is not merely the relation, but the relation’s relating itself to itself. This, says Anti-Climacus, must either come from God, or it is self-established; that is, somehow the self is able to constitute itself by establishing a reflective relation with the syntheses between body and soul, finite and infinite, temporal and eternal, free and necessary. On this view, not only does the self become self-aware, but its awareness of itself is fundamentally the result of its own doing. Anti-Climacus rejects this option, because he recognizes, in the dialectic, the two forms of

⁶³¹ *SUD*, p. 38/*SKS* 11, p. 154, emphasis in original.

⁶³² *SUD*, p. 39/*SKS* 11, p. 155, emphasis in original.

⁶³³ *Ibid.*

⁶³⁴ *SUD*, p. 40/*SKS* 11, p. 156.

⁶³⁵ *Ibid.*

despair which he then explicates. If the self is self-established, he argues, there would only be one form of despair: that of ‘not wanting to be oneself’.⁶³⁶ Anti-Climacus claims that the self is unable to “arrive at or to be in equilibrium and rest by itself, but only, in relating to itself, by relating itself to that which has established the entire relation.”⁶³⁷ This is because a person can also desire despairingly “to be oneself.”⁶³⁸ In other words, the very fact that people seek to ‘be themselves’ suggests that the self is not self-established, otherwise why would people exhibit this peculiar phenomenon? But the fact that people don’t want to be who they are suggests that there is also a sense in which they *are* themselves. Somehow there is an imbalance.

Anti-Climacus concludes that something else must be active in establishing the self. “The misrelation of despair,” he says, “is not a simple misrelation but a misrelation in a relation that relates itself to itself and has been established by another, so that the misrelation... reflects itself infinitely in the relation to the power that established it.”⁶³⁹ The goal, and the hope, of all selves is to overcome this misrelation entirely: “The formula that describes the state of the self when despair is completely rooted out is this: in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it.”⁶⁴⁰ For Anti-Climacus, and for Kierkegaard, God is the ground of this transparent rest.⁶⁴¹ The recognition of the possibility of movement towards God is placed (by God) in all human hearts, thus our motivation and our goal both reside in the same source. Resting transparently in the ground that establishes our selfhood takes place as we move from the dialectic of quantitative mediation to a dialectic that breaks

⁶³⁶ *SUD*, p. 14/*SKS* 11, p. 130.

⁶³⁷ *Ibid.* This is also why a purely naturalistic account of selfhood fails; there is no equilibrium, because the self is literally just an illusion.

⁶³⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶³⁹ *Ibid.* Haufniensis, for his part, seems to agree with this assessment, which reveals the extent to which the two pseudonyms are consonant with one another: “Do away with itself, the spirit cannot; lay hold of itself, it cannot, as long as it has itself outside of itself.” (*CA*, p. 44/*SKS* 4, p. 349.)

⁶⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴¹ *SUD*, p. 83/*SKS* 11, p. 197.

away from the world and finds itself in relationship with the God who is the source of the self-relation in the first place.

This can also be seen with reference to spirit. Some might argue that spirit is nothing more than the self-conscious relation. What is spirit, then, prior to selfhood? Climacus seems to suggest that it is nothing at all: “Development of spirit is self-activity; the spiritually developed individual takes his spiritual development along with him in death. If a succeeding individual is to attain it, it must occur through his self-activity.”⁶⁴² The implication is that spirit, as nothing more than self-activity, does not exist apart from the person who is an actual self. This seems to fly in the face of Climacus’s apparent commitment to selfhood. How can he be so opposed to mediation while at the same time affirming the reduction of spirit to self-activity? The answer, it seems to me, is that Climacus’s definition of spirit excludes the explicitly Christian implications of God as ground. That is, Climacus does not consider spirit in a context larger than the individual self, in which spirit, and its concomitant subjectivity, are expressed in actuality. He states as much: “That the knowing spirit is an existing spirit, and that every human being is such a spirit existing for himself, I cannot repeat often enough.”⁶⁴³

While the Hongs are right to insist that spirit existing ‘for itself’ refers to the same self-relation described in *SUD* as ‘relating itself to itself’, Climacus never explicitly establishes God as ground.⁶⁴⁴ Rather, his goal is to point out the limitations of speculation and mediation when trying to establish the truth for self-relating individuals. The unity of thinking and being, Climacus says, is actual for God, but it is never that way with human beings: “As soon as the being of truth becomes empirically concrete, truth itself is in the process of becoming.”⁶⁴⁵

⁶⁴² *CUP*, p. 345/*SKS* 7, p. 316.

⁶⁴³ *CUP*, p. 189/*SKS* 7, p. 174.

⁶⁴⁴ *SUD*, p. 174, note 6.

⁶⁴⁵ *CUP*, p. 190/*SKS* 7, p. 175.

Thinking and being are never united for “any existing spirit, because this spirit, itself existing, is in the process of becoming.”⁶⁴⁶ The existing spirit must admit that “the abstract answer is only for that *abstractum* which an existing spirit becomes by abstracting from himself qua existing, which he can only do momentarily, although at such moments he still... exists nevertheless.”⁶⁴⁷

For Anti-Climacus, however, spirit is fundamentally a gift from God. Human beings only have the possibility of selfhood, he says, because God, “who constituted man a relation,” releases that relation to become itself in actuality.⁶⁴⁸ Without this conception of the spiritual self-relation as a possibility given by God, we are left, according to Anti-Climacus, with a self-relation that appears to come from nowhere.⁶⁴⁹ The self-defeating features of such a view are clear enough, but the question remains: how can we speak of a self-constituting self, given that the catalyst for such a self is something that, absent the Absolute (God), is manifested only together with the self, and thus apparently cannot be a legitimate ground for it? It seems evident that Kierkegaard’s answer to this question is that such a self is nothing more than an abstraction, because it lacks the proper metaphysical grounding necessary for genuine selfhood.

Kierkegaard would perhaps not be surprised, then, by the increasing turn among non-theistic philosophers and scientists toward a deflationary view of selfhood that views the self as nothing more than a useful fiction. Absent from a corresponding metaphysical framework, there seems to be little reason to believe in the actuality of the self. Indeed, Kierkegaard—or at least

⁶⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁷ *CUP*, p. 191/*SKS* 7, p. 176. Again, mediation fails to help because it cannot really remove the person from existence: “can mediation then help the existing person so that he himself, as long as he is existing, becomes mediation, which is, after all, *sub specie aeterni*, whereas the poor existing one is existing?” (*CUP*, p. 192/*SKS* 7, p. 177.)

⁶⁴⁸ *SUD*, p. 16/*SKS* 11, p. 132.

⁶⁴⁹ Anti-Climacus rules this out when he describes the two kinds of despair: “to will to be oneself” and “not to will to be oneself.” (*SUD*, p. 14ff/*SKS* 11, p. 130ff.) The former, he says, is only possible if the self has *not* established itself, for why should the self that has established itself despair over what it has established? But if there are two kinds of despair, and we also rule out an Absolute ground, then we are left with a self that appears to have no ground to speak of.

Anti-Climacus—seems to think that it takes the genuine existential ordeal of despair (which also has to do with recognizing one’s situation vis-à-vis possibility) to finally wake a person up, so to speak, to the reality of the Absolute.⁶⁵⁰ If this is so, then it seems to follow that only a person who has faced despair and made the qualitative movement associated with overcoming that despair is in a position to believe in the actuality of the self. To really know oneself *as a self*, one must respond existentially rather than rationally.

Selfhood as Becoming

I have outlined Kierkegaard’s vision of selfhood as dialectical, free, and grounded. Before ending this chapter, I offer a brief consideration of what it means for the Kierkegaardian self to ‘become’ itself. Here, again, we find that possibility plays a key role. Anti-Climacus plainly states: “Possibility and necessity are equally essential to becoming (and the self has the task of becoming itself in freedom)... A self that has no possibility is in despair, and likewise the self that has no necessity.”⁶⁵¹ Despair, as we have seen, comes from the fact that we can never fully self-establish ourselves in either possibility or necessity, just as we can never fully self-establish ourselves in infinitude or finitude. Possibility, however, remains the mode of self-becoming: “Insofar as it is itself, it is the necessary, and insofar as it has the task of becoming itself, it is a possibility.”⁶⁵² Certainly both possibility and necessity are required for the fulfillment of the self, as well as for thinking and for decision. And possibility must not try to

⁶⁵⁰ “[O]nly he whose being has been so shaken that he has become spirit by understanding that everything is possible, only he has anything to do with God.” (*SUD*, p. 40/*SKS* 11, p. 156.)

⁶⁵¹ *SUD*, p. 35/*SKS* 11, p. 151.

⁶⁵² *Ibid.*

overthrow necessity, or it ends in despair.⁶⁵³ But it is possibility, not necessity, that drives the becoming of the self.

For Kierkegaard, necessity refers to the absolutely contingent but existentially necessary conditions in which one is placed; it is not possible for me to escape my historically conditioned place and time, I cannot be anywhere other than ‘where’ I am located. Nevertheless, movement is possible—within the necessity of one’s finite location, one can make actual existential changes, in particular, one can change oneself. Thus, Anti-Climacus states, “necessity is literally that place; to become oneself is literally a movement in that place.”⁶⁵⁴ Here it is helpful to critically engage once again with Arnold Come. Come reminds us that for Kierkegaard “possibility is future; and possibility becomes actuality only in freedom, never of necessity.”⁶⁵⁵ But he further suggests that in *SUD* Kierkegaard modifies his previous view of possibility to include the “function of the imagination,” which seems to imply that what is possible for/in the imagination is only possibility in the ‘negative’ or ‘hypothetical’ sense of the self.⁶⁵⁶ Come is concerned that Kierkegaard’s use of ‘imagination’ as a source of possibility bifurcates the self along contradictory lines; the self is said to use imagination to create possibilities for itself, but these possibilities are then taken to be only theoretical or hypothetical, and never become genuine through their own merit, but only as the conditions which allow the self to come forth permit it to do so.

Come suggests a third option: “the ‘possible self’ pictured in imagination” is “something *more* than the universal potentiality of selfhood” but is “something *less* than the concrete actual

⁶⁵³ “[I]f possibility outruns necessity so that the self runs away from itself in possibility, it has no necessity to which it is to return; this is possibility’s despair.” (*SUD*, p. 35-36/*SKS* 11, p. 151.)

⁶⁵⁴ *SUD*, p. 36/*SKS* 11, p. 152.

⁶⁵⁵ Come, *Kierkegaard as Humanist*, p. 160.

⁶⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

self.”⁶⁵⁷ And, he asks, “does something of one’s uniqueness (*Eiendommelighed*) also inhere in this (intermediate) possible self, as well as in the unique particularity of one’s finite differentiations as incorporated into the concrete actual self?”⁶⁵⁸ This suggestion, it seems to me, can effectively be linked to the Kierkegaardian understanding of possibility I have been developing. Indeed, when we apply an appropriately deep metaphysics of possibility, I suspect that Come’s concerns about illegitimate bifurcations are alleviated. In terms of actualized possibilities, it seems rather obvious that the possible self is ‘more’ than universal potentiality and ‘less’ than the actual self. But, in addition, imagination is not the only factor involved in actualizing possibilities. In fact, it might be argued that freedom and will are even more important, and these are existential elements that must be active if the self is to move from the abstract possibilities of the imagination to the actualized possibilities of lived existence.

Furthermore, we must ask whether a person’s unique finitude, which of course is subject to certain determinations, is a settled particularity, or a particularity that is always fundamentally in motion, and thus never really static. If it is the latter (and I think it is), then the extent to which Come can reasonably assert that the unique particularity of one’s finitude is something ever entirely representable becomes questionable. This is related to the idea of figuration mentioned in chapter three.⁶⁵⁹ If all language is figurative to some extent, then the language of selfhood and possibility used here must be. This implies that, whatever we say about a thing, we never capture that thing in language. It is not whether or not we can accurately say what some ‘thing’ is. Rather, the question is whether or not, in our figurative linguistic representation of that thing, we are referring to an unchanging thing-in-itself or a phenomenal representation. Kierkegaard never intended for his depictions of the imagination to be taken as literal explanations of the way that

⁶⁵⁷ Ibid, emphasis in original.

⁶⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁹ See p. 168, footnote 493.

possibility develops. Rather, he is using the category of the imagination as a boundary term, which expresses the point that existential possibilities can *and must* be abstractly conceived prior to their willed actualization in freedom. If this was not the case, then there would be no ideas about which human beings could make decisions. We would simply be slaves to necessity.

Come rightly notes that the reflective or imaginative self sees what *could* happen to itself, as a result of the inherent and inextricable synthesis in which it abides. The reflective self does not necessarily enact its possibilities, but it does imagine them; hence, it knows them as possibilities in such a way that it in some sense creates these possibilities for itself, although it has not yet acted upon them. Likewise, the reflective self also recognizes that the possibilities might not occur; in this way, it sees its limitations, and knows that no contingent possibility is guaranteed, including its own existence. Come then states: “for Kierkegaard, the task of the self’s conscious reflection, as engaged in the infinitizing activity of its imagination, does not end with grasping the naked, abstract, ‘infinite form’ of the self. Its final task does not lie in imagination’s dispersal in the exploration of feeling, knowing, willing separately, but is achieved in picturing the possible self in its wholeness, its unity, its concreteness, its actuality.”⁶⁶⁰ So, “the ‘possibility’ of self pictured by the imagination involves both, but lies somewhere *in between*, (a) the universally human *potential* for selfhood *and* (b) the unique, contingent, fortuitous, extrinsic conditions in which a particular individual is ‘concrete’.”⁶⁶¹

There are clearly limits on what we can become, due to the particular contingencies of our finitude. But, second, there is a limit in the sense that we cannot do otherwise than become something. We are beings-in-becoming, and we cannot be otherwise. So to try to go against our becoming is not only unnatural, it is ultimately impossible. Failing to recognize this leads

⁶⁶⁰ Come, *Kierkegaard as Humanist*, p. 162.

⁶⁶¹ Come, p. 163, emphasis in original.

directly to despair. These parameters constitute limitations for our possibility. So, says Come, the possibility of the self must be seen as something “*in between*” these parameters.⁶⁶² Possibility is ‘infinite possibility’ but only in as much as it remains within certain identifiable boundaries. This is presumably a ‘good infinite’ in Hegelian terms, and consists of an inward ‘turning’: “I am that gestalt of capacities, inclinations, dispositions, tastes, temperament, humour, insights, attitudes, values, ideals, intentions, commitments, beliefs, etc., and of locations on spectrums... That gestalt is my life’s possibility, which I am called upon, in full self-consciousness, to heed and to ‘obey’ when faced with the choice of becoming my self here and now in the ‘present’.”⁶⁶³

Further, says Come, “if this gestalt dissolves, or if it ceases to inform my self-awareness and to find expression in my behaviour and relationships, then I lose my identity, and I cease to exist.”⁶⁶⁴ This becomes the key concern I have with Come’s analysis. Does he really think that such a gestalt is ever fully actualized? The problem can be illuminated by asking two questions. First, is such a gestalt possible? The answer to this clearly seems to be ‘yes’. Second, is this gestalt actualized by any human being in their own power? Kierkegaard would say ‘no’ to this, but Come’s answer is unclear. He reminds us that “possibility does not pass over into actuality smoothly, easily, rationally, of necessity. Rather... this act brings with it a suffering and agony which is something more than that caused by the uncertainty of the outcome... There is an additional kind of uncertainty inherent in coming-into-existence when one has achieved a measure of self-consciousness and reflection.”⁶⁶⁵ In other words, there is both the angst of not knowing what will happen to oneself and the angst of relinquishing the control over deciding whether or not to act. Once an action has begun to unfold, there is no way to stop it. Once

⁶⁶² Come, *Kierkegaard as Humanist*, p. 165, emphasis in original.

⁶⁶³ Come, p. 167.

⁶⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁵ Come, p. 173.

actuality has begun, the possibility of that action is no more.

However, if freedom is the leap by which I choose to actualize my selfhood by becoming who I will be, this means that there is something to become. This would be a trite claim, except for the fact that there is no reason to think such ‘becoming’ is something I bring about *ex nihilo*. Neither did Kierkegaard believe this; clearly, the becoming is always already essential to my being, even prior to my awareness of it. So what is it that makes possible the becoming of the self? How does that which is other than the self catalyze the self’s becoming? Hegel’s answer is to posit that the self is both itself and other-than-itself at once, which means that the self can be self-positing. But this solution, as far as Kierkegaard is concerned, eliminates freedom. What other options may there be? Can an emergent third, the third that is positive spirit, truly sustain the self? From where does this arise? We are left, once again, with the need to postulate some kind of Absolute in and by which the becoming of selfhood is a possibility in the first place. This is the point at which faith in God becomes vital for the assurance of the self’s completion.

Summary

In this chapter, I have outlined a view of the Kierkegaardian self that is, I believe, consistent with his metaphysics of possibility. This self requires the recognition of its own possibility and the need for that possibility to be grounded in an Absolute. The question remains as to whether that Absolute must be religiously conceived or whether it can be something non-religious. In the final chapter, I will assess the ways in which the ‘possible self’ is developed through Kierkegaard’s three ‘life-stages’—the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious—in order to provide a more complete picture of how Kierkegaardian possibility drives the self. In so

doing, I will suggest that ultimately the aesthetic and ethical stages fail to offer the completion of selfhood, and that only the religious sphere provides any hope for the fulfillment of the self. I will then briefly consider what this means for Kierkegaard's metaphysics and what it implies for us, as interpreters of his thought today.

Chapter Five: Possibility and Selfhood

Introduction

In this final chapter I draw together my analyses of Kierkegaardian possibility and selfhood in order to explicate the ways in which a metaphysics of possibility is at work in the life of the individual. Possibility and actuality are present in all three of Kierkegaard's spheres or 'stages' of life (aesthetic, ethical, and religious), inasmuch as there are opportunities to actualize the possibilities which present themselves in every situation. However, the challenge to the self in all three spheres is how it can actualize its possibilities so that its selfhood properly emerges. At the root is the question of whether complete self-actualization is possible, or whether selfhood must result from some other, external influence. In the end, I argue that Kierkegaard thinks that both internal and external dynamisms are necessary, but the internal must be finally be subordinated to the external. In other words, the self is dependent on an absolute, eternal ground of all possibility. Accordingly, only the religious sphere offers the possibility of genuine selfhood. This stems from the recognition that only God is the source of all possibility, which is part of the metaphysical background out of which Kierkegaard's portrait of selfhood emerges.

Possibility in the Aesthetic Sphere

I begin my analysis by examining possibility in the aesthetic sphere. The relation of the aesthetic self to its possibilities is not particularly productive; possibility overwhelms the aesthete and basically disables any capacity for genuine selfhood. This is made evident throughout Kierkegaard's writings. In *Either/Or* we are told that the aesthete is "an accidental human being." Later, in *The Sickness Unto Death*, Anti-Climacus suggests that an aesthetic (or

immediate) person is not a self, since “he identifies having a self by externalities.”⁶⁶⁶ That is, the immediate person does not even realize what it means to properly be a self. Thinking about possibilities without enacting any of them, the aesthete has not yet taken responsibility for herself in freedom. The aesthetic self is therefore only a potential self.

Genuine selfhood includes a volitional aspect that takes place in the synthesis of self-relation. This is not found in the aesthetic self. Instead, the “connection between the two poles... is inert. There is no dynamic interplay between the two.”⁶⁶⁷ So, the aesthetic self does not make decisions that relate to its own responsibility; it is responding either as a physical or a psychical being, but not as a complete self. In George Pattison’s words, aesthetic individuals “turn out to be reality-poor [and] lacking solidity... they exist merely as possibility, not actuality.”⁶⁶⁸ But what does it mean to exist ‘merely’ as possibility? The aesthete (*A*) in *Either/Or* offers a number of glimpses into his condition, providing a valuable context for the examination of aesthetic possibility. I will consider a few of these aesthetic ‘self-reflections’ before moving on to the criticisms of the aesthete put forward by Kierkegaard’s other pseudonyms (and Kierkegaard himself).

A is not unaware of his desire for possibility; in fact, he states that he is “continually *aeterno modo*,” a Latin phrase taken from Spinoza that refers to living ‘in the mode of eternity’.⁶⁶⁹ That is, the aesthete has succumbed to the overwhelming pull of possibility. We could almost say that he is addicted to possibility. When reflecting on the meaninglessness of his own life, *A* states: “My soul has lost possibility. If I were to wish for something, I would wish not

⁶⁶⁶ *EO*, 2, p. 256/*SKS* 3, p. 244; *SUD*, p. 53/*SKS* 11, p. 167.

⁶⁶⁷ Gregory Beabout. “Kierkegaard on the Self and Despair: An Interpretation of the Opening Passage of *The Sickness Unto Death*.” *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, Volume 62: Hermeneutics and the Tradition, 1988, p. 108.

⁶⁶⁸ Pattison, p. 36.

⁶⁶⁹ *EO*, 1, p. 39/*SKS* 2, p. 48.

for wealth or power but for the passion of possibility... Pleasure disappoints; possibility does not. And what wine is so sparkling, so fragrant, so intoxicating!”⁶⁷⁰ However, like an addiction, there is ambivalence with regard to the object of desire. A knows that possibility, as infinite openness, can be both a source of meaning and meaninglessness, and he wryly reflects on this: “my life is like the word *Schnur* in the dictionary, which first of all means a string, and second a daughter-in-law. All that is lacking is that in the third place the word *Schnur* means a camel, and in the fourth a whisk broom.”⁶⁷¹

The stance of the aesthete thus reflects ambivalence about becoming a self. The aesthete is, to quote Clare Carlisle, “*indifferent* to the possibilities available to him.”⁶⁷² This indifference, however, conceals a deeper failure on the part of the aesthete, and this failure is precisely a result of the aesthete’s unwillingness to face his own possibilities. A’s lack of will is not ultimately indifference *per se*, but rather is driven by an underlying despair. It is worth noting that the aesthete is potentially self-reflective. He is able to recognize both possibility and necessity, and is aware of his own existence as being affected by and having an effect on external reality. However, the aesthete does not admit the need to decide between possibilities; rather, he lives immediately in the possibilities that surround him, seemingly indifferent to any responsible action that may be required. The aesthete sees selfhood merely “as a plaything for the play of his arbitrariness,” because there is none of the self-choice that would entail the synthesis of opposites necessary for genuine selfhood.⁶⁷³

Why would the aesthete choose to remain in such a situation? Why does Johannes (the

⁶⁷⁰ *EO*, 1, p. 41/*SKS* 2, p. 50.

⁶⁷¹ *EO*, 1, p. 36/*SKS* 2, p. 45.

⁶⁷² Carlisle, p. 65, emphasis in original.

⁶⁷³ *EO*, 2, p. 258/*SKS* 3, p. 246. As Mark C. Taylor notes, the ‘Seducer’s Diary’ provides an example of such a person: “Although Johannes (the seducer) has much to do with reality, Kierkegaard insists that he does not belong to the real world. Drawn to possibility and away from actuality, Johannes avoids involvement in concrete existence. In fact, he never really enters into an actual relationship with Cordelia.” (Taylor, p. 238.)

seducer) prefer the thrill of the seduction to the actual relationship? It is not that the seducer has no ability to actualize possibilities, but rather that he prefers not to: he is not interested in seeing the possible become actual, but wishes to reside in the realm of possibility, where he can imagine certain outcomes, and, if reality does not conform to his imagination, manipulate possibilities in such a way as to never have to step outside the abstract and actually exist. Similarly, A is ambivalent not because he has no actual desire; as the analysis of the ‘unhappiest one’ illustrates, A recognizes and encourages the search for meaning and happiness in life.⁶⁷⁴ But he also sees that these are ultimately impossible to achieve, given the contingency and finitude of life. Thus, he finds solace in possibility, where the completion that eludes him in existence is never lost, since it can never be exhausted. The seducer, likewise, never has to experience the loss of a relationship if he never actually has one in the first place.

From the point of view of the aesthete, this attitude is entirely reasonable. As Carlisle points out, “Indifference is not ‘wrong’ from the point of view of knowledge... On the contrary, it is absolutely rational—and it is precisely this confinement within rationality that Kierkegaard wants to condemn as existentially impotent and nihilistic.”⁶⁷⁵ Stack agrees, asserting that such nihilism “is the ultimate by-product of skepticism and doubt. The antinomies of conceived possibilities negate each other and there is a subtle erosion of the concept of truth.”⁶⁷⁶ The skeptical aesthetic response to possibility is itself a source of ambivalence, in that it forces the aesthete to work against himself. Nihilism is self-defeating, precisely because the admission of meaninglessness entails also that the position of the nihilist is also meaningless. Hence, there appears to be no reason to be a nihilist. The aesthete reacts to this realization in the following manner: he immerses himself in possibility so as to avoid dealing with the hopelessness of his

⁶⁷⁴ *EO*, 1, p. 222ff/*SKS* 2, p. 215ff.

⁶⁷⁵ Carlisle, p. 56.

⁶⁷⁶ Stack, p. 26-27.

situation.⁶⁷⁷

In *Either/Or*, then, we come face to face with a self that relates inauthentically to itself; even though the aesthete's position may 'officially' be one of disinterest or indifference, there is, at the same time, a sense of the self's being overwhelmed by the possibilities it faces. The aesthete famously describes the futility of existing within a field of seemingly unlimited possibilities: "Marry, you will regret it; don't marry, you will also regret that; marry or don't marry, you will regret both."⁶⁷⁸ His extension of this fatalistic mantra to several key areas of life testifies to what Judge William finds so disconcerting about the aesthetic mode of existence—it views all possibilities as having little or no value; one mode of life is no better than another. In the end, it doesn't matter how one lives, because all choices lead to the same realization, the same outcome; life ends and there are no winners or losers, only people who have lived and died ultimately for no meaningful reason.

The problem, as William sees it, is that the aesthete does not inhabit the proper 'life-view'. According to William, there are "life-views that teach that we are to enjoy life but place the condition for it outside the individual. This is the case with every life-view in which wealth, honors, noble birth, etc. are made life's task and its content."⁶⁷⁹ The lover whose whole reality is wrapped up in the beloved is found in this life-view. There are also "life-views that teach that we are to enjoy life, but the condition for it lies within the individual himself, yet in such a way that it is not posited by himself. Here the personality is ordinarily defined as talent... Satisfaction in life, enjoyment, is sought in the unfolding of this talent."⁶⁸⁰ Here we find the genius as well as the artist. However, in each of these, the life-view remains focused on an object that is meant to

⁶⁷⁷ Pattison calls this "the mode of aesthetic escape." (Pattison, *Kierkegaard's Upbuilding Discourses*, p. 88.)

⁶⁷⁸ *EO*, 1, p. 38/*SKS* 2, p. 47.

⁶⁷⁹ *EO*, 2, p. 182/*SKS* 3, p. 177.

⁶⁸⁰ *EO*, 2, p. 183/*SKS* 3, p. 178.

provide the meaning for one's existence. This leads William to conclude that "[E]very life-view that has a condition outside itself is despair."⁶⁸¹

Why is this the case? As soon as I recognize that my life-view is not as solid as I had hoped, the worry that there may not be a consistent meaning to my life begins to creep in. If I focus on unity, identity, and permanence, I may not feel this worry. But, as Stack rightly notes, "once we reflect upon oppositions, contradictions, paradoxes, dialectical relations, the gratuitous nature of empirical events, the complexity of even the most apparently simple act or process... the subjective sense of the chaotic character of 'the world' emerges again."⁶⁸² And, since even the nihilist cannot deny his or her own existence without lapsing into solipsism, inauthenticity becomes inevitable. In the aesthete, this is due to the dissonance between his inability to escape his existence and his deep rational ambivalence toward that very existence. This is why the aesthete's indifference to possibility is only apparent; it is, at root, an attempt to avoid responsibility.

William is adamant on this point: "every esthetic view of life is despair, and... everyone who lives esthetically is in despair, whether he knows it or not. But when one knows this... then a higher form of existence is an imperative requirement."⁶⁸³ This 'imperative requirement' is not something the aesthete can escape through an appeal to ignorance; the very fact that *A* is in conversation with William reveals that *A* is aware of his situation. His only option is to reject William's claims, and this, as far as William is concerned, is evidence of *A*'s absconding from responsibility, which is a form of cowardice: "It is as if a person wanted to rejoice in a relationship based on a misunderstanding that sooner or later would come to light, but he did not have the courage to be aware of it or to admit it and wanted to take delight in the relationship as

⁶⁸¹ *EO*, 2, p. 235/*SKS* 3, p. 225.

⁶⁸² Stack, p. 26.

⁶⁸³ *EO*, 2, p. 192/*SKS* 3, p. 186.

long as possible.”⁶⁸⁴

As an example, William suggests the Roman emperor Nero.⁶⁸⁵ In Nero’s case, indifference ultimately resulted in his sitting idly by, watching as Rome burned. Alluding further to the biblical destruction of Jericho, William describes A’s self-destructive attempt to “march around existence seven times, blow the trumpet, and then let the whole thing collapse so that your soul can be soothed.”⁶⁸⁶ The image is of a person who hopes for the collapse of actuality, in order to avoid actual existence. Consider one who becomes numbed to repeated activities and finds no joy in anything, unless it is ‘new’ or ‘different’. Pleasure is only found in the possibility of the next experience, since current experiences soon fail to embody the excitement they once held. Accordingly, the self’s indulging in abstraction extends to greater and greater depths.

This attitude is to be rejected. William’s response to A’s refusal to responsibly take hold of his possibilities is to point out its ultimate end: “[C]an you think of anything more appalling than having it all end with the disintegration of your essence into a multiplicity, so that you actually became several, just as that unhappy demoniac became a legion, and thus you would have lost what is the most inward and holy in a human being, the binding power of the personality?”⁶⁸⁷ The result of the aesthetic mode of existence is precisely that the self doesn’t become a self at all, but rather mutates into a plethora of incomplete ‘selves’, disconnected from one another, leading to the ultimate breakdown of the self as each piece chases after a different unrealized possibility. This leads to the dissolution of freedom—the more possibilities we have

⁶⁸⁴ *EO*, 2, p. 229/*SKS* 3, p. 219.

⁶⁸⁵ See *EO*, 2, p. 186-87/*SKS* 3, p. 179-80. Pattison notes: “The problem with Nero is not that he is anxious, but that he has not used – has not the courage to use, William says – his anxiety in the right way... to remain in anxiety is to surrender to an atrophy of the spirit, it is never to enjoy the freedom that anxiety anticipates but always to fall away from it, opting for spectatorship over engagement.” (Pattison, *Philosophy of Kierkegaard*, p. 60.)

⁶⁸⁶ *EO*, 2, p. 160-61/*SKS* 3, p. 158.

⁶⁸⁷ *EO*, 2, p. 160/*SKS* 3, p. 158.

ving for our attention, the less freedom we have to actually make meaningful choices.⁶⁸⁸ To abandon oneself entirely to abstract possibility is in effect to eliminate freedom. In *On the Concept of Irony*, Kierkegaard critiques Romanticism in similar terms.⁶⁸⁹

Of course, no person can become fully ‘transparent’ to himself or herself. The danger for A is not that he will be unable to fully open himself up to the possibility of his selfhood, but that his refusal to take responsibility for his selfhood will lead to the inability to be transparent to himself at all; his being overwhelmed by possibility may happen “to such a high degree” that he will become “inexplicably intertwined in the life-relations that lie beyond him” and thus unable to open himself transparently at all.⁶⁹⁰ In this way, the very thing that the aesthetic self desires—possibility—is that which ultimately destroys it. The result of the aesthete’s downward spiral into an ever-deepening ocean of possibilities has already been proclaimed: it leads to despair. Despair is the last thing that the aesthete wants to admit, because it means the aesthetic sphere is no longer tenable.⁶⁹¹

It is important to note the connection between the aesthetic self and necessity. This may seem odd, given the insistence thus far that the aesthetic self is trapped in abstract possibility. How is abstract possibility synonymous with necessity? When we consider the dynamic-synthetic essence of selfhood, the answer becomes apparent: since possibility and necessity are both required for the sustained dialectic that fosters the becoming of genuine selfhood, there is at every moment the risk of stagnation. That is, as soon as the self exists statically and is no longer

⁶⁸⁸ For an intriguing psychological commentary on this issue, see Barry Schwartz, *The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2005.

⁶⁸⁹ Pattison argues that for Kierkegaard the Romantic ironist “has no ‘*an sich*’... no intrinsic characteristics that make him one thing rather than another; he is nothing but a field of empty and undefined possibilities.” (Pattison, *Philosophy of Kierkegaard*, p. 34.)

⁶⁹⁰ *EO*, 2, p. 160/*SKS* 3, p. 158.

⁶⁹¹ “Every person who lives only esthetically therefore has a secret horror of despairing, for he knows very well that what despair brings is the universal, and he also knows that what he has his own life in is differences. The higher an individual stands, the more differences he has exterminated or despaired over, but he always retains one difference that he is unwilling to exterminate—that in which he has his life.” (*EO*, 2, p. 228/*SKS* 3, p. 218.)

becoming itself in freedom, it is necessitated by all of the forces that are present in the actual world. If a self refuses to actualize any possibilities, choosing instead to anchor itself in abstraction, it will in actuality become entirely subject to the pole of necessity, which is equally a feature of the world in which the self resides.⁶⁹²

Anti-Climacus echoes this idea when he asserts, “This self becomes an abstract possibility; it flounders in possibility until exhausted but neither moves from the place where it is nor arrives anywhere, for necessity is literally that place; to become oneself is literally a movement in that place.”⁶⁹³ Without the movement of enacted decision, the self becomes overwhelmed, ‘swallowed up’ in possibility, and finds itself in an abyss of despair wherein finally the self becomes nothing more than a phantom, what appears to be actual but is nothing other than possibility personified.⁶⁹⁴ To be sure, the aesthete may not view things in this light. In fact, says William, the aesthete does distinguish between experiences, and believes that in so doing he is making genuine decisions. However, “this distinction is very relative, for as long as a person lives only esthetically, everything really belongs to him equally accidentally.”⁶⁹⁵ In other words, since none of these decisions are existentially grounded, they are ultimately empty, having no significance either for the person or the world.⁶⁹⁶

But perhaps one might argue that the aesthetic mode of life and its concomitant indifference to existence simply reflect the reality of our situation as human beings who exist on a small planet in one of literally billions of galaxies, all of which will eventually be destroyed

⁶⁹² As Carlisle puts it, “[T]he aesthete—like the Hegelian dialectic—is governed by necessity: despite his freedom to move between possibilities... he lacks the power to realize any of them.” (Carlisle, p. 55.)

⁶⁹³ *SUD*, p. 36/*SKS* 11, p. 152.

⁶⁹⁴ *Ibid.* Taylor observes, “The reflective observer finally becomes a spectator of his own life... But since the observer consistently refrains from intentional activity, reflection simply leads to further dissipation of concrete individuality by the endless proliferation of possibility.” (Taylor, p. 56.)

⁶⁹⁵ *EO*, 2, p. 260/*SKS* 3, p. 247-48.

⁶⁹⁶ Pattison poignantly describes the aesthete’s miserable condition: “he can thus be anything and everything... because he is nothing.” (Pattison, *Philosophy of Kierkegaard*, p. 36.)

under the weight of the universe collapsing upon itself. It may not be a pretty picture, but it is the way things are. Kierkegaard contends with this view because he sees in it an incipient despair that remains unacknowledged. This despair is evidenced by the emotional state of the aesthete.⁶⁹⁷ But is this really the case? It seems clear that many people not only *do not* recognize themselves as despairing, but would neither be taken by others to be in despair. And, Judge William, at least, argues that the person who has ethically established herself is no longer subject to the despair of the aesthete.⁶⁹⁸ The ethical, then, may be the solution to aesthetic despair.⁶⁹⁹ We must accordingly examine possibility in the ethical sphere and consider whether or not it is reasonable to conclude that despair is overcome therein.

From Despair to Decision: Possibility in the Ethical Sphere

The fact that the aesthete is in despair does not mean there is no hope at all; in fact, taking into account what Anti-Climacus says in *The Sickness unto Death*, aesthetic despair may be the first step toward existential freedom.⁷⁰⁰ William likewise asserts, “This by no means says that the person who lives esthetically does not develop, but he develops with necessity, not in freedom; no metamorphosis takes place in him, no infinite internal movement by which he comes to the

⁶⁹⁷ Carlisle notes, “One might... argue that the aesthete’s indifference and impotence merely reflect the truth of human existence: that life has no meaning and that the self has no power. The simple answer... is that the aesthete is unhappy. His writings are pervaded by his melancholy mood; he *suffers* from the lack of purpose in his life.” (Carlisle, p. 56, emphasis in original.)

⁶⁹⁸ *EO*, 2, p. 225/*SKS* 3, p. 215: “[E]very esthetic view of life is despair; this [is] due to its having been built upon that which can both be and not be. This is not the case with the ethical life-view, for it builds its life upon that which ‘to be’ essentially belongs. The esthetic... is that in a person whereby he immediately is the person he is; the ethical is that whereby a person becomes what he becomes.”

⁶⁹⁹ As William puts it: “Despair, then... and your liberated spirit will vault up into the world of freedom.” (*EO*, 2, p. 219/*SKS* 3, p. 210.)

⁷⁰⁰ See *SUD*, p. 15/*SKS* 11, p. 131.

point from which he becomes the person he becomes.”⁷⁰¹ In other words, the aesthete changes in the same necessary manner in which all things change—according to the causal chains in which they reside. But this is not existential change; this is merely psycho-physical change. The reflective aesthete who begins, by virtue of despair, to respond to the necessary actualization of contingent metaphysical possibilities in the world by making a committed decision to become a self becomes existentially united with that actuality.

This is where ethical selfhood begins. It is a qualitative change, a fundamental shift in which the self is transformed in a manner that could never have been the case if it had remained in the aesthetic sphere. As William explains, this involves both reason and choice:

“When an individual considers himself esthetically, he becomes conscious of this self as a complex concretion intrinsically qualified in many ways; but despite all the internal variety, all these together are nevertheless his nature, have equal right to emerge, equal right to demand satisfaction... his self consists of this multiplicity, and he has no self that is higher than this. Now, if he has what you so often speak of—esthetic earnestness and a little common sense about life—he will perceive that it is impossible for everything to flourish equally. Then he will choose.”⁷⁰²

The aesthete, then, who realizes the impossibility of selfhood in the aesthetic sphere *and* who is willing to make the decision by which he rejects the nihilistic pull of abstraction moves, in a qualitative sense, from the aesthetic to the ethical sphere.⁷⁰³ This decision-movement is certainly not easy; as the fruit of despair, it creates an intense conflict in the aesthete’s consciousness.⁷⁰⁴

The temptation is to think that having the possibility of freedom, and recognizing it as freedom,

⁷⁰¹ *EO*, 2, p. 225/*SKS* 3, p. 215.

⁷⁰² *EO*, 2, p. 225/*SKS* 3, p. 215-16.

⁷⁰³ for Kierkegaard, a genuine metaphysical change takes place when a person decides to actually exist as a self in the world, instead of merely physically existing as a thing: “The fact is that when I understand something in possibility, I do not become essentially changed, I remain in the old ways and make use of my imagination; when it becomes actuality, then it is I who am changed, and now the question is whether I can preserve myself.” (*JP* 3346/*Pap X 2 A 202*, *n.d.*, 1849.)

⁷⁰⁴ Accordingly, Kierkegaard cautions against what Pattison calls “the error of idealization,” wherein one is “too hasty in asserting the freedom of the self in response to its experienced incapacity. That moment of incapacity is not simply to be overcome: it is to be endured and suffered to and beyond the breaking-point of the self.” (Pattison, *Kierkegaard’s Upbuilding Discourses*, p. 90.)

is enough for authentic existence. But this leads right back to an aesthetic life-view and the failure of genuine selfhood.

Just as William tells the aesthete in *Either/Or* to ‘choose himself’, so also Anti-Climacus, in *The Sickness unto Death*, wants the self to relate itself to itself. And, in both cases, the decision is difficult; one is beset on all sides by despair, and it is only by faith—living into and through despair in the hope of the impossible—that one can come out on the other side as a genuine self. Moving from the aesthetic to the ethical is a necessary transition for the becoming of selfhood. As a person makes this movement, however, they will find that the decision to relate to oneself in actuality becomes increasingly easier to maintain. Kierkegaard writes in the *Journals*, “The more significant an individual is, the easier he will find actuality to be, the more difficult he will find possibility. This is the expression of an ethical view. Viewed esthetically (that is, in relation to enjoyment), he will find possibility more intensive than actuality.”⁷⁰⁵

In spite of the conflict and suffering to be endured, great gain comes from making the decision to move beyond the aesthetic sphere: “The estheticists are... afraid that life will lose the entertaining multiplicity it has as long as every particular individual is regarded as living within esthetic categories... [but] nothing perishes; all the esthetic remains in a person except that it is made an auxiliary and precisely thereby is preserved.”⁷⁰⁶ By virtue of the dialectical ‘double movement’, all the positive aspects of the aesthetic sphere paradoxically return to the ethical self. In the qualitative movement from aesthetic selfhood to ethical selfhood, then, one must not merely make a choice, but must make an *eternal* choice, that is, a continual choosing of oneself that does not mistakenly place existential freedom within the abstract, idealized category of possibility.

⁷⁰⁵ *JP* 3340/*Pap* IV A 35, *n.d.*, 1843.

⁷⁰⁶ *EO*, 2, p. 229/*SKS* 3, p. 219.

One might conclude that the matter ends here. The ethical sphere, however, finds itself in the same dilemma faced by the aesthetic sphere; neither is ultimately sufficient for genuine selfhood. Judge William locates the fulfilment of possibility in the ethical. He insists (like Hegel) that the ethical self is propelled by freedom, not necessity, but this, I suggest, is a dubious claim.⁷⁰⁷ To see why, I must examine William's argument in further detail. We have already seen (in chapter two) that William refers to the self in terms of freedom.⁷⁰⁸ The self emerges from a dialectic of freedom that holds together the objective and subjective elements of consciousness without allowing either to be subsumed under the other. William's description of the self as the 'most abstract' and the 'most concrete' of things points to this dialectical character of selfhood. Kierkegaard finally breaks with Hegel on the question of whether the dialectic can be logically sustained. In *Either/Or*, however, William argues that the "most abstract expression" of selfhood, freedom, may be found both in the aesthetic and the ethical self.⁷⁰⁹

Indeed, one of William's goals is to show that the aesthetic conception of selfhood is defective due to the aesthete's inability to properly recognize and apply the freedom he does in fact have. This freedom is, again, the freedom to choose oneself absolutely. But this choice, says William, involves "two dialectical movements" that take place simultaneously: on the one hand, there is "that which... comes into existence through the choice," and on the other hand, there exists "that which is chosen... otherwise it is not a choice."⁷¹⁰ That is, the decision to choose oneself absolutely involves both non-being and being, possibility and actuality. The decision to choose oneself has both to do with the actual self, the "immediate personality," and the possible

⁷⁰⁷ Responding to A, he says: "The personality is first set at ease in despair; not by way of necessity, for I never despair necessarily, but in freedom, and only therein is the absolute attained." (*EO*, 2, p. 213/*SKS* 3, p. 204.)

⁷⁰⁸ *EO*, 2, p. 214/*SKS* 3, p. 205.

⁷⁰⁹ *EO*, 2, p. 215/*SKS* 3, p. 206.

⁷¹⁰ *EO*, 2, p. 215/*SKS* 3, p. 207.

self that, in freedom, is actualized in and by the choice.⁷¹¹ This dialectical double movement represents the genesis of selfhood, as well as a continuous ‘crossroads’ for the self, so to speak. The self may remain within an aesthetic context and isolate itself in “boundless multiplicity,” or it may commit itself to its own becoming in freedom and in so doing become an ethical self.⁷¹²

The ethical self recognizes itself as inhabiting a world of endless possibilities, but, unlike the aesthete, the ethical self also understands that world as history, that is, “he stands in relation to other individuals in the race and to the whole race,” and realizes that selfhood is made possible by this history.⁷¹³ This is why, says William, it takes courage to be an ethical self; there is a ‘repentance’ that must take place. This is not a repentance from sin, but it has a similar structure in that it expresses the absolute commitment one has to oneself, in the same way that repentance expresses one’s absolute commitment to God.⁷¹⁴ William compares the ethical decision with the act of salvation: “when the passion of freedom is aroused in him... he chooses himself and struggles for this possession as for his salvation, and it is his salvation. He can give up nothing of this, not the most painful, not the hardest, and yet the expression for this struggle, for this acquiring is—repentance.”⁷¹⁵ In other words, there is a double dialectic at work, but unlike Christian salvation, in which there are two parties in the dialectic, the self and God, in this case both roles are enacted by the self, so the self becomes the source and goal of its own repentance.

What of the statement that the ethical self repents “back into the race, until he finds himself in God”—is this not contrary to my reading?⁷¹⁶ Given the underlying Hegelian resonances of William’s ideas on selfhood, ethics, and history, it seems reasonable to conclude

⁷¹¹ Ibid.

⁷¹² *EO*, 2, p. 216/*SKS* 3, p. 207.

⁷¹³ Ibid.

⁷¹⁴ Ibid.

⁷¹⁵ Ibid.

⁷¹⁶ Ibid.

that what is being described in this statement is not a claim about Christian repentance per se, but rather a vision of the self's returning to the universal spirit that provides it with the recognition of itself; that is, we have an account of the ethical self's decision as being both free and necessitated. It is an attempt to describe the *aufhebung* that occurs in the decision to choose oneself ethically, absolutely. And yet, we catch glimpses of the tension that will push Kierkegaard in another direction. When William writes, "His self is, so to speak, outside him, and it has to be acquired, and repentance is his love for it, because he chooses it absolutely from the hand of the eternal God," we encounter, in nascent form, the dilemma that will come to define the break between Kierkegaard and his Hegelian contemporaries: if I choose myself absolutely, but only because I recognize that I cannot truly be a self unless I do so, then how can I really be choosing myself absolutely?⁷¹⁷

I can only genuinely choose myself to the extent that I already am a self. Thus, to choose myself *absolutely* implies that I am somehow already a complete self, even if I am not aware of this fact. We are thrown back onto the issue of necessity raised by the Hegelian response to Kant's ethical aporias. For Hegel, the ethical mandate is indeed logical, and it is incumbent upon us to embody that logic, since it is already absolute. Our ethical commitment is an expression of the absolute. The assurance of self-completion is bound up in the necessity of the principle, which is taken to be logically invulnerable.⁷¹⁸ For William, too, the ethical is our final hope: "there will come a moment in [the aesthete's] life when his spirit, too, will be matured in the moment of choice; then he will choose himself, then he will also repent of whatever guilt may rest upon him."⁷¹⁹ The decision to choose oneself absolutely in the face of despair leads to the

⁷¹⁷ *EO*, 2, p. 217/*SKS* 3, p. 208.

⁷¹⁸ In this sense, one can perhaps interpret Kierkegaard's entire reaction to the Hegelian ethico-religious model as an attempt to clarify precisely where possibility, and its concomitant hope, has a role in that system.

⁷¹⁹ *Ibid.*

becoming of selfhood: “the self over which I despair is something finite like everything else finite, whereas the self I choose is the absolute self or my self according to its absolute validity.”⁷²⁰

This, according to William, is an eternal choice: “Through this choice... I choose the good, and when I choose the good, I choose *eo ipso* the choice between good and evil. The original choice is forever present in every succeeding choice.”⁷²¹ The ‘good’ here refers, unsurprisingly, to an Absolute Good. But to eternally choose an Absolute Good for its own sake eliminates freedom, if we include the claim that there is an imperative to follow the Good and that this imperative is historically enacted. It would seem, in that case, we have no choice *but* to become ethical. To the extent that we fail, we are simply not becoming genuine selves. Moreover, this implies that no one is ever a complete self, since no one is absolutely ethical and (given our finitude) there is no reason to think anyone ever will be. How does William respond? He appeals to the eternal quality of the ethical, which provides the person with the means to accomplish the task: “When the individual has grasped himself in his eternal validity, this overwhelms him with all its fullness. Temporality vanishes for him... What temporality is able to give, the more or less that appears here, is so very insignificant to him compared with what he possesses eternally.”⁷²²

One must, of course, choose “in the right way;” that is, one must not abandon oneself so much to the absolute that the self becomes stagnant or apathetic, for then it will mistake its own relation to the absolute and pompously assume that it *is* the absolute.⁷²³ Rather, the self must see itself ‘in freedom’, i.e., existential freedom. William assures us, “If he does that... However

⁷²⁰ *EO*, 2, p. 218-19/*SKS* 3, p. 209.

⁷²¹ *EO*, 2, p. 219/*SKS* 3, p. 210.

⁷²² *EO*, 2, p. 231/*SKS* 3, p. 221.

⁷²³ *Ibid.*

concrete his self is, he nevertheless has chosen himself according to his possibility; in repentance he has ransomed himself in order to remain in his freedom, but he can remain in his freedom only by continually realizing [*realisere*] it.”⁷²⁴ Unfortunately, this seems like equivocation: in what sense is the ‘choice’ free if it will necessarily be completed by the absolute? It seems that the self must rely on something other than possibility for its completion, and that is the logical necessity of the ethical absolute.

This is supported by a variety of statements made by William. Here is a particularly compelling example:

“The ethical is the universal and thus the abstract. That is why in its perfect abstraction the ethical is always interdictory. Thus the ethical takes the form of law... When the ethical becomes more concrete, it crosses over into the category of morals. But in this respect the reality of it lies in the reality of a national individuality, and here the ethical has already assimilated an esthetic element... But the ethical is still abstract and cannot be fully actualized because it lies outside the individual. Not until the individual himself is the universal, not until then can the ethical be actualized... this is the secret the individual life has within itself—that simultaneously it is an individual life and also the universal, if as such not immediately, then nevertheless according to its possibility.”⁷²⁵

What is William asserting here? First, as a universal principle, the ethical remains abstract. This is the case because no universally binding principle can be individually or even nationally applied in negative terms. Said differently, the law is only required because there are those who will fail to uphold the law. If everyone followed the law, there would be no need for it; it would cease to have any significance. The abstraction of the ethical entails the failure of the law inasmuch as the success of the law means its concrete application.

The goal, then, is for each individual to actualize the ethical (i.e., the universal) in the world. Whenever a person actualizes the ethical in herself, she reveals the universal principle underlying the whole of reality. In fact, the universal ethical principle is discovered precisely in

⁷²⁴ *EO*, 2, p. 232/*SKS* 3, p. 222.

⁷²⁵ *EO*, 2, p. 255-56/*SKS* 3, p. 243-44.

the individual selves who actualize that truth: “the person who lives ethically expresses the universal in his life. He makes himself the universal human being, not by taking off [*afføre*] his concretion, for then he becomes a complete non-entity, but by putting it on [*iføre*] and interpenetrating it with the universal.”⁷²⁶ It is not that the person abstracts herself from all the properties that determine the various unique aspects of her selfhood. Rather, the person accepts those qualifications and nevertheless chooses to be committed to her self-becoming. This decision is the expression of the absolute in ethical terms, as the self acquiesces to the demand that the universal places upon it, and, in so doing, becomes itself.

According to William, this decision reveals itself in the person as the universal principle towards which the person is necessarily moving. In fact, it is true selfhood: “To be the unique human being... in such a way that he is thereby also the universal—that is the true art of living.”⁷²⁷ Unlike the aesthetic self, the ethical self has confidence in its relation to the totality of existence. It is able to make peace with what are essentially trivial causal necessities, willing the ethical “without being disturbed by [the] inconsequential.”⁷²⁸ How does this happen? The ethical person, William says, “does not try to blot out or evaporate this multiplicity; on the contrary, he repents himself firmly in it, because this multiplicity is himself, and only by penitently immersing himself in it can he come to himself.”⁷²⁹ That is, rather than ignoring or rejecting possibility, the ethical self embraces possibility in all its fullness; not, as the aesthetic self does, in order to lose itself in possibility, but rather to submit to the universal in all circumstances. Possibility becomes subject to the universal principle; indeed, the universal can only be the universal inasmuch as it is maintained in all possible circumstances.

⁷²⁶ *EO*, 2, p. 256/*SKS* 3, p. 244.

⁷²⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷²⁸ *EO*, 2, p. 257/*SKS* 3, p. 245.

⁷²⁹ *EO*, 2, p. 258/*SKS* 3, p. 246.

William emphasizes the decision-making power of the person, which is both epistemic and existential: “When the individual has known himself and has chosen himself, he is in the process of actualizing himself, but since he is supposed to do that freely, he must know what it is he wants to actualize... If he does not hold firmly to the truth that the individual has the ideal self within himself, all of his aspiring and striving becomes abstract.”⁷³⁰ This suggests a universal epistemic power motivating the self to know itself and act accordingly. William insists that “[o]nly within himself can the individual become enlightened about himself. This is why the ethical life has this duplexity, in which the individual has himself outside himself within himself.”⁷³¹ The self that is epistemically motivated by the universal eventually finds all of its possibilities actualized in and by the universal ethical principle.⁷³² Thus, the despair of the aesthete “proves to be not a break but a metamorphosis. Everything comes back again, but transfigured. Therefore, only when life is considered ethically does it take on beauty, truth, meaning, continuance.”⁷³³

Note what follows from this. The aesthete—upon correctly discerning the reality of the ethical—discovers that, in the ethical sphere, all of her aesthetic desires are fulfilled, but not in the way she had previously anticipated. It is not by actualizing all her possibilities that the aesthete is able to become a complete self, but rather by the absolute commitment to *one* possibility; namely, the ethical absolute, which enables the self to recognize what it has desired all along: unity with itself. Selfhood, then, is essentially imparted by the universal. William alludes to this when he states “the I chooses itself or, more correctly, receives itself.”⁷³⁴ Thus,

⁷³⁰ *EO*, 2, p. 259/*SKS* 3, p. 247.

⁷³¹ *EO*, 2, p. 259/*SKS* 3, p. 246.

⁷³² *EO*, 2, p. 259/*SKS* 3, p. 247. The possible self, we are told, “escorts him at all times; yet the more he actualizes it, the more it vanishes within him, until at last, instead of appearing before him, it is behind him as a faded possibility.”

⁷³³ *EO*, 2, p. 271/*SKS* 3, p. 258.

⁷³⁴ *EO*, 2, p. 177/*SKS* 3, p. 172.

although the self is deemed free, the dilemma of necessity remains, because selfhood as a gift from the universal—a logically necessary universal principle—begins to look more and more as though it must necessarily be given, if given at all. William’s view ends, it seems, either in equivocation or outright contradiction.

This concern is reflected throughout Kierkegaard’s later writings.⁷³⁵ In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, for instance, Climacus asserts that in *Either/Or* what we find is not existence, but rather “existence-possibility oriented toward existence, and brought so close that one almost feels how every moment is wasted in which a decision has not yet been reached.”⁷³⁶ In other words, the point of *EO* is not to replace the inferior aesthetic worldview with the correct ethical one, but rather to point out the weakness of the aesthetic and thus drive the individual toward the ethical decision that is necessary for the becoming of the self. However, this does not mean that residing in the ethical sphere indicates the completion of the self. In fact, it can be argued that William undermines his own view in *Either/Or* with the “Ultimatum” he offers at the end of the book.⁷³⁷

Responding to an Initial Criticism

Perhaps, however, my analysis misses the point: surely the issue for Kierkegaard is not whether the possible self has grounded itself metaphysically such that its unity is assured, but

⁷³⁵ Hannay notes: “Whatever meaning we get out of the pseudonymous works subsequent to *Either/Or*... the works themselves deliberately undermine the suggestion presented in *Either/Or* that life confronts us with a radical and exhaustive choice between an aesthetic and an ethical view of life. The ethical view is now presented as a limitation, as a kind of recourse, something one might even feel tempted to adopt in order to escape the rigours of true individuality.” (Hannay, *Kierkegaard* [2001], p. 188)

⁷³⁶ *CUP*, p. 253/*SKS* 7, p. 230.

⁷³⁷ Joel Rasmussen, for instance, argues that the “Ultimatum” ironizes William’s own position in that it argues for the opposite of what William has been saying in *EO*. (Joel Rasmussen, *Between Irony and Witness: Kierkegaard’s Poetics of Faith, Hope, and Love*. New York: T & T Clark, 2005, p. 67ff.)

rather whether the self's existential decision is such that it establishes the passionate commitment necessary for such completion to be possible. In other words, the actual completion of selfhood may be impossible, but what matters is that the person has committed herself existentially in a manner that makes possible the right relation to the universal. The complete transformation (and unity) of self and world may never be actualized, but an existential commitment to that possibility drives the expectation of, and potential for, the actualization. This, it might be argued, is what Kierkegaard desires of us as individuals. Climacus, for instance, appears to hold such a view, when he writes, "The ethical specifically wants to annihilate the disinterestedness of possibility by making existing the infinite interest."⁷³⁸ But the question, then, is whether such an infinite interest is possible. If not, we are left either with a failure of ethics, or the need for an ethical imperative that is necessarily actualized.

The latter, however, seems to eliminate human freedom, which cannot happen if the dialectic is to be sustained. Climacus accordingly attempts to bolster the human capacity to actualize the imperative of ethics: "when I join eternity and becoming, I do not gain rest but the future."⁷³⁹ In other words, there can be no passive or stagnant relation to the eternal, or to becoming. A committed self will be drawn into a process of continual movement, in which the relation to eternity takes place by means of constant movement into the future, which is change through repetition from possibility to actuality.⁷⁴⁰ Therefore, Climacus states that actuality, which involves ethical interest, is 'higher' than possibility: "When I think something I want to do but as yet have not done, then what I have thought, however precise it is, however much it may be called a *thought-actuality*, is a possibility. Conversely... When I have understood another

⁷³⁸ CUP, p. 320/SKS 7, p. 291.

⁷³⁹ CUP, p. 307/SKS 7, p. 280.

⁷⁴⁰ Pattison notes that here 'possibility' describes "the kind of abstraction from reality that is encountered both in poetry and in metaphysics... forms and conditions of possible existence." (Pattison, *Philosophy of Kierkegaard*, p. 42.)

subject, his actuality is for me a possibility, and this thought-actuality is related to me *qua* possibility just as my own thinking of something I still have not done is related to the doing of it.”⁷⁴¹

Said differently, actuality is higher than possibility because it is present to me in existence. However, no matter how much I think I know a person or an object, there remain possibilities that are unknown to me, because I can never fully grasp the actuality of a thing inasmuch as I have not fully experienced that thing. There is always an approximation of reality taking place, because the totality of actuality is never complete. An indeterminable amount of possibility remains, just as my own life contains possibilities which are still not yet actualized. Accordingly, Climacus now asserts that possibility is higher than actuality.⁷⁴² How is this not a contradiction? Pattison explains, “A genuinely ethical interest... will always only be interested in what is presented as a real possibility for the subject’s own actions. An ethical task, an ‘ought’, has to become present as a possibility before it can be actualized.”⁷⁴³ That is, the dialectic of possibility and actuality is at work here epistemologically; paraphrasing Kant, we might say that possibility without actuality is ‘empty’, and actuality without possibility is ‘blind’.⁷⁴⁴

One must move from thinking abstractly to thinking existentially if one hopes to actualize the thought. However, thought must retain its abstract or ‘negative’ pole, rather than eliminate it. The dialectic is not simply a ‘forward’ movement, but a back-and-forth in which the goal is not the removal of all abstract possibility, so that pure and complete actualization of existence may be achieved in thought, but rather the continual extension of possibility alongside actuality which

⁷⁴¹ *CUP*, p. 321/*SKS* 7, p. 292-93, emphasis in original.

⁷⁴² *CUP*, p. 322/*SKS* 7, p. 293.

⁷⁴³ Pattison, *Philosophy of Kierkegaard*, p. 42.

⁷⁴⁴ A similar train of thought seems to be at work in Anti-Climacus’s statement: “If losing oneself in possibility may be compared with a child’s utterance of vowel sounds, then lacking possibility would be the same as being dumb. The necessary is like pure consonants, but to express them there must be possibility.” (*SUD*, p. 37/*SKS* 11, p. 153.)

provides thought with the means to recognize its own limits.⁷⁴⁵ This keeps thought from trespassing the boundaries set for it by existence. Neither, then, is existential thought disinterested speculation. The relation is different: no longer is thought just ‘about something’ (an object which has no actuality), but it is thought ‘for something’, and that something will be treated differently, because it is actualized. Both the thought and its object affect not only the thinker, but other actual objects, including other persons, as well. This is why Climacus says that the ethical is present when thought becomes ‘interested’ in existence.⁷⁴⁶

Climacus is clear that this dialectical mode of thought does not create actuality; after all, our thoughts do not bring the world into existence.⁷⁴⁷ Nevertheless, the self’s activity in thought—when existentially motivated such that it does not dwell endlessly in possibility but, through the absolute decision to be committed to the absolute, becomes renewed in relation to actuality—does involve a kind of action that has metaphysical implications. The decisions I make really do change the world, since they are not passive responses to physical possibilities determined by causal sequences, but are active engagements with existential possibilities that require free decision on my part to actualize.⁷⁴⁸ This is existing; this is what matters. Thus, Climacus can say not only that subjectivity is truth, but also that subjectivity is “actuality.”⁷⁴⁹ It is because of the infinite passionate commitment of the self that actuality can be more than merely a series of causal chains and chance happenings. In this way, changes do take place in the self, and this is what matters, existentially. My ethico-religious commitments, we might say,

⁷⁴⁵ This is the meaning of Climacus’s statement, “Just as the statement that everything is true means that nothing is true, in the same way the statement that everything is in motion means that there is no motion. The motionless belongs to motion as motion’s goal [*Maal*]... both in the sense of τέλος [end, goal] and μέτρον [measure, criterion].” (*CUP*, p. 312/*SKS* 7, p. 284. The Danish word *Maal* is ambiguous; it encompasses both meanings. [*CUP*, 2, p. 244, footnote 520.]

⁷⁴⁶ *CUP*, p. 320/*SKS* 7, p. 291.

⁷⁴⁷ *CUP*, p. 331-32/*SKS* 7, p. 303.

⁷⁴⁸ “The actuality is not the external action but an interiority in which the individual annuls possibility and identifies himself with what is thought in order to exist in it. This is action.” (*CUP*, p. 339/*SKS* 7, p. 310.)

⁷⁴⁹ *CUP*, p. 343/*SKS* 7, p. 314. Of course, it must be admitted that Climacus also says that subjectivity is ‘untruth’.

make me who I am, and this is enough.

In fact, according to Climacus, it doesn't matter whether any human being ever truly fulfills the requirement of the ethical, since the goal of ethics is not to force the fulfillment of its claims but rather to present the ethical principle as something to strive for. What matters is not the destination but the journey, so to speak: "ethically understood it is every individual's task to become a whole human being, just as it is the presupposition of ethics that everyone is born in the state of being able to become that. Whether no one achieves it is irrelevant; the main thing is that the requirement is there."⁷⁵⁰ But—the journey to selfhood seems only as meaningful as the destination toward which the self is aimed. That is, if the self does achieve genuine completion then its fulfillment cannot remain an abstraction. It seems, then, that a self that has failed to actually fulfill its highest purpose—that has failed to achieve the Good—remains incomplete.

It is right to say, then, that it is sufficient for the self to merely actualize a *commitment* to its absolute Good, regardless of whether that goal is *actually* reached or not? In the end, Kierkegaard maintains that Climacus's account is incomplete.⁷⁵¹ As Kierkegaard does not merely seek to establish the importance of the journey—though he *does* think it is important—but also hopes to encourage individuals that a genuine transformation of existence can and does in fact take place, it seems reasonable to say that mere ethical commitment does not represent Kierkegaard's final word on the topics of possibility and selfhood. Kierkegaard's own preferred view is, I submit, found throughout his authorship.

For instance, in *Fear and Trembling* we encounter the knight of resignation, who, in a manner that prefigures Climacus's view, "is reconciled with existence" through infinite

⁷⁵⁰ *CUP*, p. 346/*SKS* 7, p. 317.

⁷⁵¹ To be fair, by the end of *CUP*, Climacus essentially comes to the same conclusion. (See *CUP*, p. 559ff/*SKS* 7, p. 508ff.)

resignation.⁷⁵² Thus, the knight is transfigured through his commitment to “an eternal form that no actuality can take away from him.”⁷⁵³ The impossibility—in this case, true love—is made possible “by expressing it spiritually, but he expresses it spiritually by renouncing it.”⁷⁵⁴ That is, the knight of resignation cannot complete the movement from possibility to actuality. So, he infinitizes possibility in order to live with it as an emblem, an axiom, and/or a motivation for all of his future thoughts and actions. He is not, like the aesthete, tossed about by indecision or instability; Johannes de Silentio explains that the knight “keeps his love just as young as it was in the first moment; he never loses it simply because he has made the movement infinitely.”⁷⁵⁵

But this, of course, is not the same as Abraham’s faith. Faith is qualitatively different, because faith hopes for—even more, is existentially committed to—the actuality of the impossible. In faith there is a possibility that does not remain a possibility; it becomes an actuality. The knight of faith, says de Silentio, “acknowledges the impossibility, and in the very same moment he believes the absurd.”⁷⁵⁶ Faith, in this sense, actualizes both ethical and religious possibility. In his journals, Kierkegaard notes that Climacus bolsters this very point: “‘Actuality’ [*Virkeligheden*] cannot be conceptualized. Johannes Climacus has already shown this correctly and very simply. To conceptualize is to dissolve actuality into *possibility*—but then it is impossible to conceptualize it, because to conceptualize it is to transform it into possibility and therefore not to hold to it as actuality.”⁷⁵⁷ Accordingly, “conceptualization is retrogression, a step backward, not a step forward.”⁷⁵⁸

Kierkegaard ironizes Climacus’s words by pointing out their implications. While it is true

⁷⁵² *FT*, p. 43/*SKS* 4, p. 138.

⁷⁵³ *FT*, p. 43-44/*SKS* 4, p. 138.

⁷⁵⁴ *FT*, p. 44/*SKS* 4, p. 138.

⁷⁵⁵ *FT*, p. 44/*SKS* 4, p. 139.

⁷⁵⁶ *FT*, p. 47/*SKS* 4, p. 142.

⁷⁵⁷ *JP* 1059/*Pap* X 2 A 439, *n.d.*, 1850.

⁷⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

that the concepts at play in possibility also reside in actuality, Kierkegaard insists “there is still something more—that it is actuality.”⁷⁵⁹ He puts it this way: “To go from possibility to actuality is a step forward (except in relation to evil); to go from actuality to possibility is a step backward.”⁷⁶⁰ But this reveals a problem with mere ethical commitment—if it is always a ‘step backward’, existentially, to move from actuality to possibility, then the assertion that self-completion is found simply in the eternal commitment to the Good is false. Rather, true self-completion would be found in the actualization of that commitment. But the actualization of an eternal commitment presumably requires the appropriate capacity in the person. This is not an option for a finite being who cannot be eternally committed to the Good. Moreover, if actuality is never fully present to us, then it is a mistake to emphasize the person’s capacity to properly think the mode of actuality in the first place. On what basis can we claim our understanding of actuality is accurate, given that we cannot ever have access to the whole of reality?

Against the Argument for Ethical Sufficiency

Kierkegaard, then, does not regard the absolute commitment to the Good as itself sufficient to actualize genuine selfhood. It seems inevitable that, on continuing to reflect ethically, the self will begin to worry and, as Taylor suggests, ask ‘what if’: “what if self is not fully actualized in community; if individuality is not best expressed in universality... what if desire and duty conflict; what if God *does* create dreadful collisions; if God demands renunciation, not consummation, of love; if God requires lover to forsake beloved; if God orders

⁷⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁶⁰ Ibid.

the sacrifice of a son, perhaps his own son... what if.”⁷⁶¹ The continuing expansion of ethical possibilities, when followed through, cannot help but lead to the anxious realization that ethics may well turn out to be an impossible task. Indeed, how can it be otherwise, given that the self is admittedly incapable of even recognizing all the ways in which it falls short? The self grounded in the necessity of the ethical is, in the end, apparently no better off than the self lost in the endless play of aesthetic possibility. At best, we are left with quantitative approximation.

But perhaps approximation is enough, and the best we can hope for? Some Kierkegaardians defend what I will call ‘ethical sufficiency’; that is, they argue for a position of sustained ethical commitment in which the dialectic of selfhood is fulfilled and unity of the self can thereby be claimed. But if I am right about Kierkegaard’s metaphysics of possibility, then the ethical sufficiency model is unsustainable. Accordingly, I will now respond to two scholars who appear to support the ethical sufficiency model: George Stack and Michelle Kosch. Both have also written thought-provoking essays on Kierkegaardian possibility and selfhood. I begin with Stack, who, in his 1977 book *Kierkegaard’s Existential Ethics*, develops what is probably the first extensive engagement with the theme of possibility in Kierkegaard’s writings. In doing so, he derives certain ethical implications from his analysis that constitute what may reasonably be called an argument for ethical sufficiency.

Stack interprets Kierkegaardian possibility through an Aristotelian lens, but he also draws upon Heideggerian themes, arguing that Kierkegaard expressed a view consonant with Heidegger: “the notions of man’s fundamental potentialities—his being-possible, his projection of himself towards the realization of possibilities—are central to Kierkegaard’s understanding of human development... His usual formulation is that man is a being who *has* possibilities or who is capable of encountering what he describes, in typical dramatic terms, as ‘the nothingness of

⁷⁶¹ Taylor, p. 250, emphasis in original.

possibility’.”⁷⁶² But is possibility merely that from which a person’s motivation to actualize existential contingencies emerges? This not only seems to be missing key elements of Kierkegaard’s thought, but also cannot provide the sort of complete selfhood that is incipient in Kierkegaard’s project. Why would he go to such lengths to describe the possibility of the self before God if he knew it was nothing more than a way to get people to live steadfastly in the face of their contingency and finitude? Why be so harsh on the aesthete if there really is no ultimate *telos* or eternal happiness, but only the actualization of contingent possibilities? That would be worse than irony; it would be cynicism.

Stack, however, asserts that for Kierkegaard “the attempt to evade the ethical (*ethisk*) possibility is a turning away from one’s own highest possibility.”⁷⁶³ He continues, “once the question of the possibility of becoming a morally self-conscious individual is raised, one cannot doubt this possibility. To paraphrase Kant’s dictum, if one knows that he can be what he ought to be (from a moral point of view), then he ought to endeavor to be what he ought to be.”⁷⁶⁴ But, as we have seen, although the ethical is an important element of selfhood, it cannot establish the fullness of the self that one desires. Against Kant, Kierkegaard suggests that the self has some awareness of what it ought to be, and then discovers that it *cannot* be what it ought to be. The self recognizes that it does not have the capacity to truly be complete, if its self-being is contingent upon finite existence. This would mean that we are left with the ever-shifting contingencies of the ethical, which are only approximately ascertainable.

What about the suggestion that the ‘possibility of choosing’ itself is what matters? Stack claims: “The reflection that is characteristic of a turn towards the ethical possibility is not a reflection upon an object... it is a reflection, as Kierkegaard put it in his journals, upon the

⁷⁶² Stack, p. 44, emphasis in original.

⁷⁶³ Stack, p. 67.

⁷⁶⁴ Stack, p. 68.

ethical ‘communication’ itself... In self-reflective knowledge one discovers any number of ontic possibilities for oneself as well as a potentiality for good or for evil.”⁷⁶⁵ Is this self-reflective commitment, undertaken with infinite passion, enough to serve as the self’s development and goal of the self’s possibilities? I think not. Contra Stack, individuals do not have “the capacity to understand... [their] own state of being.”⁷⁶⁶ The recognition that one is not what one ought to be does not entail that one can understand *how* to be what one ought to be, or even precisely *what* one ought to be. Stack is wrong to infer that “the most fundamental potentiality (or possibility) that a rational human being ‘has’ is a potentiality for ethical self-existence.”⁷⁶⁷ For Kierkegaard, human sinfulness means we are unable to ethically assess our own potentiality as selves. Though I am becoming something, it is not at all clear that the self I am becoming is the self I should be and may be capable of becoming if I could see myself clearly.

This suggests that openness to possibilities is just as likely a source of self-devolution as self-evolution. Stack then points out that Kierkegaard “does not by any means say that man *has* infinite possibilities; rather, he can *imagine* infinite possibilities (and infinite possibility).”⁷⁶⁸ This is accurate, but incomplete; it neglects the multilayered character of Kierkegaardian possibility. The self has possibilities that extend even beyond its imagination. Stack’s statement is true of existential possibilities, but Kierkegaard also recognized the metaphysical ramifications of this assertion; namely, a self that is able to imagine infinite possibilities and also knows it cannot actualize all of them must either accept that limitation or seek to overcome it. But both options are problematic: on the one hand, how does one actually overcome one’s finitude without assistance from outside itself? On the other hand, if one accepts this limitation, then the self is

⁷⁶⁵ Stack, p. 69.

⁷⁶⁶ Stack, p. 70.

⁷⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁶⁸ Stack, p. 80, emphasis in original.

forced to admit that it is necessarily incomplete, since there is always more for the self to become, and it is impossible for the self to achieve this actualization on its own.

Stack suggests that in accepting its limitations and incompleteness the self genuinely becomes itself. But this seems promising only if he is also willing to suspend judgment about what the self is meant to become; that is, he must reject any substantial teleology of the self. This appears to contradict Kierkegaard's view of selfhood. Moreover, the argument may be incoherent, since arguing that the self 'becomes itself' on account of its limitations and incompleteness appears to denote a teleological component to the self that conflicts with that incompleteness. But even if we grant Stack's argument, what might it mean for a self to become itself by virtue of its incompleteness? Is this not a resignation to one's existential limitations, which is precisely what Kierkegaard calls us to overcome in the movement of faith? Perhaps the solution is to establish a commitment to one's unique, incomplete existence, such that selfhood is maintained as the unique set of finite properties that make up a particular individual. However, as Kierkegaard repeatedly makes clear, this will only be as successful for human beings as their ability to commit existentially to that kind of selfhood allows.

Given the above epistemic and metaphysical constraints, it becomes dubious whether any person can really make the sort of existential commitment required for genuine selfhood. How reasonable is it to think that any self who is unsure of what it ought to be (and how to be itself) will be in a position to make such a commitment? Instead, the position put forward by Stack begins to look like a form of self-deception. If the self is unclear about how to become itself, and this extends even to the ethical, the ethical self can easily become wrapped up in possibility as much as the aesthetic self. The difference is that whereas aesthetic possibility is endless in the sense of a 'bad infinite', ethical possibility has the character of a 'good infinite'; that is, there is

an ethical center that purports to provide coherency, so that our possibilities are properly bounded. However, as Kierkegaard has repeatedly pointed out, if this (Hegelian) vision of ethical possibility is to succeed, then either the infinite character of the ethical must be presupposed to be necessary—in which case freedom is eliminated—or we must be able to explain how a finite human being can achieve this ethical infinitude. Certainly, one can commit oneself to the ethical in spite of its limitations and be motivated by a life dedicated to a universal principle. But is this not simply a form of resignation; a quantitative assessing of our life-project that Kierkegaard finds insufficient for genuine selfhood?

Michelle Kosch, for her part, is more candid. She thinks Kierkegaard is simply wrong; we can and do establish ourselves ethically. She claims that “no remotely plausible account has yet been advanced” (including Kierkegaard’s own) that opposes the ethical as a viable life-view.⁷⁶⁹ Any criticism of the ethical, she asserts, must accomplish its task “without presupposing the truth of religious commitments or even the applicability of religious concepts.”⁷⁷⁰ Otherwise, the view is merely presupposing what it sets out to prove; namely, that the religious life-view is preferable to the ethical. As Kierkegaard’s views “antecedently presuppose belief in the Christian God,” Kosch rejects his view as based on an unreasonable premise.⁷⁷¹ This is a fair point; however, I submit that her own view is subject to a similar critique. On reflection, the Christian God may be an absurd presupposition, but so is Kosch’s own preferred solution, the antecedent ethical absolute.⁷⁷²

⁷⁶⁹ Kosch, p. 139. One of the valuable aspects of Kosch’s book is the way in which it places Kierkegaard in dialogue with Kant and Schelling. As Kosch rightly notes, Kierkegaard’s metaphysical intuitions are influenced by both of these thinkers, but he ultimately disagrees with them about the essence of human agency, even as he appropriates many of their ideas. (Kosch, p. 140.)

⁷⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷⁷¹ Kosch, p. 141.

⁷⁷² One might retort that for Kierkegaard Jesus Christ, the God-man, is the ‘absolute paradox’, and thus is surely the most paradoxical, and accordingly most absurd, belief to hold. While this is an interesting point, I would merely point out that I doubt debating degrees of absurdity is beneficial to or desired by supporters of ethical sufficiency.

Kosch's argument is essentially that, in spite of our metaphysical and epistemic limits, we do have access to a rational ethical principle that may be deemed sufficient to qualify as the source outside of ourselves that grounds our ethical commitments, thereby making genuine selfhood (as much as can be expected of finite human beings, anyway) possible after all.⁷⁷³ Kosch agrees that Kierkegaard's view of the ethico-religious must be wedded to what she calls a "non-deterministic metaphysics or at least to a principled scepticism about the possibility of causal explanations of action."⁷⁷⁴ However, she insists that the appeal to Christianity is, in Climacus's own words, "desperate" because of the impossibility of any legitimate historical proof.⁷⁷⁵ In her view, Religiousness B, which for Climacus is consonant with Christianity, can be appropriated by any view that "passes the test of fit with existing subjectivity."⁷⁷⁶ What does this mean? According to Kosch, the test is passed when the Good (i.e., a moral absolute) is not in the human subject as an object of thought, but is outside the person. Consequently, our human freedom remains, as the Good is not forced upon us by reason, and there is no internal self-contradiction that results in the inescapable dilemma of the 'ethics of autonomy'.

Because such a decision is based on genuine existential freedom, rather than being logically determined by the Good itself, it remains viable. Kierkegaard's Christianity is far from the only alternative; indeed, any view that it committed to the Good via genuine existential freedom would qualify, as long as it does not succumb to the temptation to deny one's responsibility. As the religious view shifts responsibility onto God, it does not meet the

⁷⁷³ Come suggests a similar solution when he asks what might happen if one, rather than gazing into its own possibilities, chooses instead to "[keep] its attention on its proper object, namely, the projected possible self?" (Come, *Kierkegaard as Humanist*, p. 59.) That is, "What if freedom overcomes its alarm and terror and dares to step out into the unknown in order to accomplish the positive unity of its possibility and necessity into its authentic selfhood? After all, according to Kierkegaard failure is not necessitated." (Ibid.) The question we must ask here is: what makes such proper attention possible? Is it reasonable to expect that any human being can accomplish such a task?

⁷⁷⁴ Kosch, p. 179.

⁷⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁷⁶ Ibid.

qualifications needed to escape from the ethics of autonomy. So ‘faith’ must be reconfigured in a non-religious sense: “Kierkegaardian faith rests on the apparent but inexplicable normative force of a set of historical events.”⁷⁷⁷ This definition is taken to be consistent with the Kierkegaardian claim that Christianity can never be the result of empirical data or rational proofs.⁷⁷⁸ This gives the impression that beliefs are simply a matter of the will; that is, they “have what force they have on the basis of the individual’s decision to put credence in them.”⁷⁷⁹ Kosch rightly rejects this, as well as any ‘constitutive’ views that suggest the objects of beliefs are made true by virtue of the way in which the person believes.⁷⁸⁰

Kierkegaard’s conception of agency, then, is one in which “free but (morally and immorally) motivated action is possible” and also where “both the normative authority of revelation and the psychological possibility of sin are accounted for.”⁷⁸¹ However, unlike the Fichtean view, where the relation of the self to itself is absolute (that is, the self is posited by and grounded in itself such that no external powers cause the self to be itself), Kierkegaard presents the self as established by another. Thus, Kosch says, “The self is spontaneous (its actions do not have their causal source in events preceding them in time). But it is not the source of the laws that govern it; nor is it the source of its own existence as a self.”⁷⁸² Moreover, the self is aware of this fact about itself. Here the question is raised: what qualifies as the ground of this selfhood? Can it be what Kosch calls a brute “phenomenological fact,” a view she attributes to Heidegger and Sartre?⁷⁸³ Or must it be, as Anti-Climacus argues, the God for whom all things are possible?

⁷⁷⁷ Kosch, p. 187.

⁷⁷⁸ Kosch’s definition seems flawed, however; it is not the historical events that provide the force, but rather the meaning they are imbued with, and this, while in a sense ‘historical’, is not given by history, but by imagining possibilities that carry with them a kind of transformative power.

⁷⁷⁹ Kosch, p. 189.

⁷⁸⁰ Kosch, p. 192.

⁷⁸¹ Kosch, p. 200.

⁷⁸² Kosch, p. 203.

⁷⁸³ Ibid.

Kosch privileges the first option. Her solution seems eminently practical: the self simply needs to acknowledge its limits and live within them. She notes: “Despair takes the forms that it does because human agency has the structure that it has—is something that, in relating to itself (as self-conscious *locus* of agency) simultaneously relates to something outside itself... There does need to be *something* independent of the self and its activity from which norms can come, and this something must also be a plausible source of value, but something can fill those conditions without being the causal source of the agent’s existence.”⁷⁸⁴ The obvious objection is that her view is self-defeating, because it presumes the ability to conceive of “a conception of human freedom for good and evil... in the absence of an ethical criterion that would specify the content of those notions.”⁷⁸⁵ In other words, to claim that we are free ethical agents already presupposes some standard by which our ethical agency can be determined, and if, as stated above, this standard is unreliable, then how do we not end up simply restating a premise that Kosch has already rightly declared false; namely, that we create our own subjective ethical standards and freedom is nothing more than *liberum arbitrium*?

Kosch offers a Kantian riposte. She notes that Kant thought that “some specifiable moral law must be the *ratio cognoscendi* of freedom.”⁷⁸⁶ The critic has pointed out that without some criterion for what counts as good and evil, some “determinate, specific moral task that we see ourselves as free for,” we cannot be free in the manner that allows for genuine moral and existential fulfillment.⁷⁸⁷ In response, Kosch argues that to ask such a question already

⁷⁸⁴ Kosch, p. 209.

⁷⁸⁵ Kosch, p. 214.

⁷⁸⁶ Kosch, p. 215.

⁷⁸⁷ Ibid. Contra Kant, whose categorical imperative posits that a human being can be a law unto herself, Kierkegaard asserts that such a ‘law’ is in fact lawlessness, since it supposes that the one who obeys the law is also the one who, by the very fact that she must obey the law, reveals herself to be under the law, and thus cannot be the ground for that law. (See *JP* 188/*Pap* X 2 A 396, *n.d.*, 1850: “If there is nothing higher than me that is binding, and I am supposed to bind myself, whence shall I, as A who does the binding, acquire the strictness that I lack as B, who is the one bound—when after all A and B are the same self?”)

presupposes a kind of moral responsibility: “in order to think there could be some such task, we need to first think that we are the sorts of things to which such tasks can be addressed—that we are responsible agents.”⁷⁸⁸ In other words, if we lack the freedom to ascertain good and evil, then we cannot possibly ask about ourselves as ethically responsible agents. As she puts it, to the question ‘What is my ethical task in life?’ either “we know the answer already, or we lack the presupposition—freedom—that gives it force.”⁷⁸⁹

We are presented with an either/or: Kant or Kierkegaard. But this seems to be a false dichotomy. Kierkegaard’s view of possibility and freedom does not entail that I know the answer to the ethical question of my selfhood, but neither does it admit that the entire project is otherwise incoherent. Rather, it merely suggests that there are substantial problems with taking ethical knowledge to be absolutely self-grounded. Kosch herself has noted the inconsistencies of self-grounded knowledge but still ends up promoting a position that sounds suspiciously as though it posits just that. Her view seems to suggest a kind of optimistic naiveté; it asks us to accept some ethical principle that is the ground of our behavior, and then trust that even though we fail to actualize that principle—and in spite of a growing uneasiness about the perceived reliability of that principle—we should remain committed to it in the absolute sense that Kierkegaard demands of anyone who seeks to be a genuine self.⁷⁹⁰

At what point, then, does such a view turn out to be either self-positing or arbitrary? Kosch seems to suggest that, although such risks are indeed present, it remains more faithful, both to Kant and to common sense, to hold onto our ethical principles and, using a kind of pragmatic calculus, continue in our attempts to be ethical. As I have argued, Kierkegaard would

⁷⁸⁸ Kosch, p. 216.

⁷⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁹⁰ As the post-Kantians insist, Kant never adequately explained why, if human beings do share a practical commitment to rational ethical standards, it is so difficult for a consensus to be reached on what actually constitutes genuine ethical behavior.

presumably reject this intuition. An additional problem with Kosch's view is her reduction of sin to moral evil simpliciter. She does not take seriously the radical confusion of ethical and existential possibility due to sin. Such confusion leads to situations wherein the self presents a false reality to itself, such that it believes itself to be freely actualizing itself, when in fact it is becoming more and more entangled in sin. For Kierkegaard, although "the ground of freedom is also the ground of the possibility of sin," contra Kosch, what prevents this from collapsing into Hegelian necessity is not the "independence of the finite self" but rather is the absolute freedom of God.⁷⁹¹ Without this ground, ethics remains, in the end, either indefinite or posited by human beings. In the latter case, the self-positing self returns. In the former, it seems difficult to make any claims about ethics at all.

This means that Kosch's point about both good and evil tempting us "even before the two are fully recognized as such" falls short: good and evil can *never* be fully recognized as such, since to do so requires either the kind of epistemic self-grounding that Kosch rightly rejects, or the divine revelation that she eschews.⁷⁹² It is false, then, that "all inclinations" towards good or evil have been "suspended" in the choice.⁷⁹³ Thus, if the self does indeed desire to avoid being 'tempted' by its finitude then it must acknowledge its ultimate dependence on something else for that possibility. Further, if meaningful existential choices "appear as future tasks or past deeds" that cannot be reflectively deduced a priori, then Haufniensis's insistence that psychology cannot explain sin must also imply that simply accepting one's limitations and continuing to follow the ethical path to which one is committed is insufficient to explain what constitutes genuine selfhood.⁷⁹⁴ At best, it is an attitude wherein one lives according to their deeply held principles,

⁷⁹¹ Kosch, p. 211.

⁷⁹² Ibid.

⁷⁹³ Ibid.

⁷⁹⁴ Ibid.

even though there is no genuine expectation of completion or happiness. But this attitude, for Kierkegaard at least, is inadequate.

I claim, then, that the “eternal ethical standard” is insufficient to qualify as the source “on which the self arises.”⁷⁹⁵ Everything, it seems, depends on whether or not the source sustains the self. To relate to a real, objective Good is only transformative to the extent that the relation is able to be sustained. But who or what sustains this? Is it nothing more than a series of endless human attempts? Perhaps we are sustained by community; the Good is made known through the other with whom I interact, and these interactions provide the impetus for the self’s continued self-relation to itself by impelling the self to seek the Good. Of course, this is just as likely (even more likely, given our sin) to fail as to succeed. The problem becomes more intractable when we reflect on possibility. The ethical task is so complicated by possibility that, in the end, the self is capable of fully actualizing these possibilities on its own.⁷⁹⁶ What then? Must we resign ourselves to our situation as incomplete selves?

Sin as Lost Possibility

We must, it appears, take the concept of sin seriously. As Sylvia Walsh affirms, sin signifies for Kierkegaard “an absolute breach of subjectivity with the eternal that posits a radical separation between human beings and God and results in the loss of their essential self-identity in relation to the divine.”⁷⁹⁷ At the same time, “sin functions dialectically in an inverse manner as the decisive expression *for* the religious mode of existence inasmuch as the consciousness of this

⁷⁹⁵ Davenport, “Self and Spirit,” p. 18-19.

⁷⁹⁶ “Am I the good because I think it, or am I good because I think the good? Not at all.” (*CUP*, p. 330/*SKS* 7, p. 301.)

⁷⁹⁷ Sylvia Walsh, *Living Christianly: Kierkegaard’s Dialectic of Christian Existence*, University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press 2005, p. 17, emphasis in original.

condition serves as the basis for an individual's *relation to God*.”⁷⁹⁸ That is, there is a direct negative quality to sin, and an indirect positive result. But the positive result is only an option for the one who first recognizes their sin and guilt. This guilt is not synonymous with ethical guilt, since ethical guilt presupposes knowledge of the criterion of guilt. Absent this knowledge, the awareness of guilt is really an inchoate existential angst over the realization that there is some sort of ontological ‘standard’ to which one will never measure up.

According to Merold Westphal, this “transcendental guilt” has several features: it is “prior to particular faults,” meaning that it precedes all self-discovery.⁷⁹⁹ It is “the condition of the possibility of particular faults,” meaning it is that which makes ethical guilt possible at all.⁸⁰⁰ As such, it cannot be empirically or rationally determined; it can only be accepted or rejected. Transcendental guilt is also ‘qualitative’ rather than ‘quantitative’; no number of attempts to absolve oneself and set things right will ever be successful, as it is not the kind of guilt that can be assuaged transactionally (wherein an amount of evil actions, x , is outweighed by an amount of good actions, y).⁸⁰¹ This clarifies the difference between the ‘sins’ we commit and ‘sin’ per se. Therefore, says Westphal, “Total guilt is decisive because it signifies the relation of the self to its eternal happiness. It may be more obvious that such guilt signifies the distance of the self from its highest good, and indeed it does... But without this guilt there is no relation to an eternal happiness.”⁸⁰²

In other words, if I accept that some absolute Good exists, then I must decide whether I am somehow related to the Good or not. This is not a rationally or empirically verifiable claim. I must reflect on my beliefs and decide whether they seem true, in spite of my inability to

⁷⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹⁹ Westphal, p. 172.

⁸⁰⁰ Westphal, p. 173.

⁸⁰¹ Ibid.

⁸⁰² Westphal, p. 174. See *CUP*, pp. 526-27, 534-35/*SKS* 7, pp. 478-479, 485-487.

objectively justify them. Furthermore, if I do think such a relation exists, I need to explain how that relation is possible, given that I cannot, myself, ever reasonably achieve a proper relation to that good, given my finitude. This suggests a further bifurcation: either I admit some type of ‘transcendental guilt’ before the absolute Good, or I must suggest why my failure to achieve the proper relation to the Good does not constitute such guilt. The critical analyses above suggest there is no argument for ethical sufficiency that offers compelling reasons to think that the failure of a proper relation to the absolute Good is, in the end, not a problem. This raises the question of how the problem might be overcome, how this guilt might be redeemed.

This point may be recast in terms of possibility. When Haufniensis asserts, “anxiety is freedom’s actuality as the possibility of possibility,” he is alluding to transcendental guilt.⁸⁰³ In Haufniensis’s account, upon encountering possibility in the form of an absolute dictum—God’s command not to eat of the tree—Adam recognizes his freedom (and possibility) for the first time.⁸⁰⁴ He has not yet made a choice, but he is aware of the ability to choose. This motivates his formerly faint and still indefinite anxiety, because Adam is both attracted to and repelled by this ambiguous choice that he cannot yet make sense of. Remember, this takes place prior to any ‘knowledge of good and evil’—that knowledge only comes *after* Adam transgresses the command and eats from the tree. As such, the situation is not yet one of sinfulness or fallen-ness. Thus Haufniensis states, “The prohibition induces in him anxiety, for the prohibition awakens in him freedom’s possibility. What passed by innocence as the nothing of anxiety has now entered into Adam, and here again it is a nothing—the anxious possibility of *being able*.”⁸⁰⁵

We have here a description of a self who, in the initial stages of self-becoming, acquires an awareness of both its limitations and its possibilities. But at no point does the self have the

⁸⁰³ CA, p. 42/SKS 4, p. 348.

⁸⁰⁴ CA, p. 42ff/SKS 4, p. 348ff.

⁸⁰⁵ CA, p. 44/SKS 4, p. 350, emphasis in original.

capacity to integrate these completely, such that the relation of the self to itself is entirely stable. This is equally true of the self at all times, but the reflective awareness of this unstable relation constitutes the point at which the self begins its self-relation. As Haufniensis notes, “Because Adam has not understood... there is nothing but the ambiguity of anxiety. The infinite possibility of being able that was awakened by the prohibition now draws closer.”⁸⁰⁶ As his anxiety increases, Adam becomes ‘dizzy’ and when he wakes from his dizzy spell, he is a sinner, and realizes his guilt: “anxiety is the dizziness of freedom, which emerges when the spirit wants to posit the synthesis and freedom looks down into its own possibility, laying hold of finiteness to support itself. Freedom succumbs in this dizziness.”⁸⁰⁷

Haufniensis insists that a qualitative change occurs in the succumbing of freedom.⁸⁰⁸ This qualitative change can be clarified, if not fully explained, by employing Kierkegaard’s metaphysics of possibility. When we consider the self, we must delineate the different levels of possibility involved. Most prominent here are the existential possibilities related to the free choices of the self. These are the choices that Adam becomes aware of when he first encounters the prohibition. But, as noted previously, existential possibility is a subset of metaphysical possibility, as is the domain of physical possibility. The possible self must also contend with these, as they bear upon the self’s existence. In other words, physical and metaphysical factors outside of my control can affect the kinds of existential possibilities I have available to me. Moreover, there are epistemic possibilities—things I possibly or actually know—that impact my ability to properly actualize my existential possibilities. The problem arises when we consider the relations between these kinds of possibility. How, for instance, do physical contingencies and metaphysical necessities relate to my existential freedom? Does not freedom, and its concomitant

⁸⁰⁶ CA, p. 45/SKS 4, p. 350.

⁸⁰⁷ CA, p. 61/SKS 4, p. 365.

⁸⁰⁸ Ibid.

existential possibilities, remain untouched by these factors?

The answer appears to be ‘no’; indeed, my existential possibilities are never settled, precisely because I cannot fully control or predict any of the other spheres of possibility. This is precisely why Haufniensian anxiety is present to the self: “For freedom, the possible is the future, and the future is for time the possible. To both of these corresponds anxiety in the individual life.”⁸⁰⁹ The ethical response attempts to ground selfhood in the active commitment to an absolute principle that provides a fulcrum of stability around which self-development may take place. But the anxiety about possibility remains present in the ethical sphere, because of the inherent nature of moral commitments; i.e., ethical imperatives are impossible to fulfill.

Supporters of ethical sufficiency will insist that in the end this impossibility is not a problem, because (even though this is our situation as selves) we nevertheless remain free to pursue our ethical imperatives and it is this ability to pursue the ethical (or any truly meaningful end), in spite of our limitations and our failures, that is the mark of a genuine self. From the perspective of possibility, however, this approach is called into question. Even if it is the case that we can live in the pragmatic manner just described, it also seems true that we lack more than just the ability to single-mindedly actualize the ethical; we also lack the ability to discern whether or not we are pursuing the ethical in the first place.⁸¹⁰

Sin, though ultimately inexplicable, may be described as the self’s attempt to control its own possibilities by its own means. It is the instinctive and expected, though not absolutely necessary, result of being overwhelmed by possibility. In sin, the self’s abstract possibilities remain open, but the situation of sin is such that the self’s abstract and existential possibilities are

⁸⁰⁹ CA, p. 91/SKS 4, p. 394.

⁸¹⁰ As Iris Murdoch puts it, “Moral tasks are characteristically endless not only because ‘within’, as it were, a given concept our efforts are imperfect, but also because as we move and as we look our concepts themselves are changing.” (Iris Murdoch. *The Sovereignty of Good*. London: Routledge, 1970, p. 28.)

not manageable. Sin is the self-deceit of thinking that one is able to determine one's possibility as a self. But this is an illusion. In fact, possibility was never manageable for the self. Rather than gradually developing a rational or ethical system for one's possibility, every attempt to do so only leaves the self with fewer assurances that its choices are leading to genuine selfhood.

If this is true, then how can we begin to ethically establish ourselves? A proponent of ethical sufficiency might reply that the very fact that persons *do* act ethically means they have reasonable ethical intuitions that should not be ruled out by an antecedent skepticism.⁸¹¹ I have suggested that Kierkegaard's metaphysics of possibility leads him to conclude that such intuitions cannot be rationally self-grounded, and, if this is so, then we must ask what kind of ground is sufficient for ethics. The thing to note here is that existential possibility is both limited *and* expanded by its relation to the other kinds of possibility. For instance, while it is certainly true that my spatio-temporal location limits my choices, it is also what makes possible the choices that I do have. If I am currently in Oxford, I cannot attend the soccer game in Seattle, but I can attend the concert at the Sheldonian Theatre. This dialectic is always present; for every physical constraint placed upon me, at least some new possibilities are created (even if those possibilities are merely 'negative').⁸¹²

Extrapolating from this point, we can see that at any given moment, the number of possibilities available to a person is virtually infinite: so, although Climacus is right that in choosing *x* I close off the possibility of not-*x* *and* all other possibilities directly competing with *x* for actualization, the flipside is that choosing *x* also opens up the new possibility of *y* that was

⁸¹¹ Murdoch herself ends up appealing to a Platonic absolute Good that is taken to be ontologically necessary and somehow apparently actualizes a capacity in the individual to be a genuine moral agent. (See Keiran Setiya. "Murdoch on the Sovereignty of Good." *Philosopher's Imprint*, Vol. 13, No. 9, May 2013, pp. 1-21.) Kierkegaard, I think, would reject this view, given the metaphysical impressions I have outlined.

⁸¹² As an example, consider a person who has just fallen and broken her leg. While it may seem that this is merely limiting, it does open up at least one new area of existential possibility: that of experiencing life and making decisions as a person with a broken leg.

not previously existentially available to me because I hadn't yet chosen *x*. This is the dialectical nature of possibility. (In this sense, the aesthetic self is making choices just as much as the ethical or religious self. However, they are existentially meaningless choices.) As a subset of the domain of metaphysical possibility, which contains all possibilities, the domain of existential possibility depends on that metaphysically antecedent domain. The implications of this view for the concept of sin can be seen in a journal entry from 1846, where Kierkegaard writes: "[T]he significance of the change of sin and the reality of this change which must be maintained if everything is not to be confused... By means of abstract imaginative thinking a person wishes to transform himself (although if this self-creation were to succeed, it would simply mean his annihilation); yet at the same time he does continue to exist [*existere*], to be present [*at være til*], and therefore it can never succeed."⁸¹³

In other words, if the self is to avoid sin altogether, it must somehow maintain a proper relation to its possibilities such that it never errs either in the possibilities it actualizes or in the possibilities it fails to actualize.⁸¹⁴ As Kierkegaard notes, "It is a dangerous business to arrive in eternity with possibilities which one himself has prevented from becoming actualities. Possibility is a hint from God. A person must follow it."⁸¹⁵ But such actualization seems impossible for human beings, given our finitude, our epistemic limits, and our previous sins. Complete existential actualization would require an ability to recognize a priori the implications of every possible decision (in this way the flaws of all ethical systems are revealed, inasmuch as they all depend on quantitative approximation). Similarly, if despair stems from the recognition of this

⁸¹³ *JP* 1348/*Pap* VII 1 A 143, *n.d.*, 1846. See also *JP* 1246/*Pap* IV B 118:1, *n.d.*, 1843-44: "If freedom now discovers an obstacle, then it must lie in freedom itself... This disturbance, however, must be supplied by freedom itself, for otherwise there would be no freedom at all or the disturbance would be a matter of chance which freedom could remove. The disturbance which is supplied by freedom itself is sin."

⁸¹⁴ Theologically, this may be framed in terms of sins of 'commission' and 'omission'.

⁸¹⁵ *JP* 3343/*Pap* IX A 352, *n.d.*, 1848.

existential failure, then any attempt to rationally eliminate despair is equally inadequate. Despair is also irreducible to quantitative approximation. This illuminates Anti-Climacus's statement regarding possibility and despair: "if a person is truly not to be in despair, he must at every moment destroy the possibility. This is generally not the case in the relation between actuality and possibility... actuality in relation to possibility is usually a corroboration, here it is a denial."⁸¹⁶

If the situation just described vis-à-vis our epistemic and existential possibilities is accurate, it seems we have no reliable means by which to establish the claim that the principles we follow are morally binding. We are no more justified in our own ethical commitments than any other person who claims to be following an absolute moral principle. If we resign ourselves to this situation, not only does sin end up disappearing as a category (becoming nothing more than a quantitative assessment of what constitutes moral evil), but we veer towards ethical relativism. Since that option has been rejected, ethics must be grounded in a self-positing source, so that its force comes from nothing other than itself. In the absence of God, any relevant candidate must be necessarily ethical and must impress itself on us sufficiently so that we submit to its ethical claim (though not of necessity). But it seems difficult to imagine such a ground without conferring qualities on it that would constitute some kind of religious feeling. That is, any such ground seems to require faith. But if this is so, then Kierkegaard's divine ground is no longer off the table. The ground need not necessarily be the Christian God, but such a God becomes, *prima facie*, at least as viable a candidate as any other religious ground.

⁸¹⁶ *SUD*, p. 15/*SKS* 11, p. 131.

Possibility and Responsibility

What of the criticism that one must not succumb to the temptation to deny one's responsibility, either by shifting responsibility onto something else, or acting as though there is not any responsibility after all? Does Kierkegaard's religious view shift responsibility onto God? Perhaps, but if the only ground that is sufficient for genuine ethicality is a metaphysically necessary ground, beyond human reason, that nevertheless forcefully impresses its absoluteness (ethical and otherwise) on us, then it seems *we cannot help but allow our responsibility to be shifted* onto that ground, inasmuch as that ground must be the source of our responsibility, even as we also must maintain our own responsibility as given by that ground. This surrendering of responsibility occurs at a different level than the decision to be a responsible self, since the surrendering that takes place in the decision to be grounded is logically antecedent to the commitment to our own ethical responsibility. Since ethical responsibility must contain an epistemological component, to the extent that we lack the knowledge of good and evil, our sense of responsibility to some ground is prior. The dialectical movement of selfhood thus begins even prior to ethical reflection. Said differently, there is a responsibility that precedes ethics.

What might this responsibility entail? Even if I lack the freedom to quantitatively (rationally) ascertain good and evil and my subsequent ethical responsibility, I may still recognize that my actions affect change. The ability to know what changes my actions entail is either something to which I already have access (in which case my ethics becomes self-positing) or it is not. Lacking the freedom to objectively ascertain good and evil does not entail lacking responsibility altogether. The possible self does not acquire responsibility in the moment of ethical transformation; rather, responsibility is already there. Though qualitatively advanced in

the movement from an aesthetic to an ethical self, a sense of responsibility is intuited by the very fact that I recognize that what I do matters, even if I cannot yet say in what way it matters. This leads to the acquiescence of my existential possibility to some ground that cannot be rationally verified. As I cannot know whether my belief in this ground is sufficiently justified, I cannot rely on that belief as the apex of my ethical behavior. Instead, I must continue to act, in every moment, with this same grounding commitment, and this is the case whether I follow Kierkegaard's Christianity or ethical sufficiency. Thus, it is too quick to claim that one of these two views rationally supersedes the other.

We have, then, an inscrutable situation in which the self, for reasons unknown perhaps even to itself, prizes its possibility above its relation to the absolute. Accordingly, the 'dizziness of freedom' is not just an outside force affecting the self, but it is something that stems from the self's desire to enact its possibilities, to actualize itself, on its own terms. This is where sin is birthed, in that self-centered leap toward existential possibility. We might even say that ethics itself, inasmuch as the self believes ethics is accessible directly to and for the self, is the problem.⁸¹⁷ Perhaps it would be helpful to reframe the 'knowledge of good and evil' as the desire to properly actualize all ethical possibilities. From this angle, sin is not mere moral failure, it is a fundamental unwillingness to relinquish control of our own self-becoming. Anxiety is not primarily due to the recognition of one's finitude and epistemic limitations (as these would not eliminate the ethical requirement). It is the recognition that alongside these limitations there resides a primal need for the self to actualize itself, a need that cannot ever be accomplished by

⁸¹⁷ As Eriksen explains, theologically, 'the law' "refers a human being to the horizon of possibilities within his own existence... the claim of the law cannot be fulfilled in a human being, as long as he is under the law, is conscious that his life stands in need of justification. The law, then, has two opposite effects on a person: It makes him seek to justify himself by fulfilling the claim set down for an authentic human life, and it makes him realise the impossibility of this fulfillment. In this way, by gradually closing the horizon of possibilities, the law makes the individual become as nothing before God, until the word of the gospel can create new life." (Eriksen, p. 134.)

the self.

If the self assuages itself psychologically, this does not eliminate its lack of fulfillment, since the lack is, at root, ontological. To deny the lack is no more rational than to accept it, as neither position can be rationally assessed, due to the limitations noted above. While this is not an argument for God, it does allow for a weaker argument; namely, that those who posit ethical absolutes are no better off than the Christian believer. This is predicted by Kierkegaard's account of sin. Where human beings have encountered themselves in their possibility and freedom and, against the active grace of God, have chosen to pursue possibility on their own terms, the result is self-entanglement and ethical confusion. This confusion is exacerbated by any attempt to escape, much like attempting to remove oneself from a thorn-bush merely results in one becoming even more stuck. Thus, says Anti-Climacus, "Every actual moment of despair is traceable to possibility; every moment he is in despair he *is bringing* it upon himself... in every actual moment of despair the person in despair bears all the past as a present in possibility."⁸¹⁸

The self's acquiescence to its ground becomes inescapable due to the responsibility it accepts in the relation to that ground. God, states Anti-Climacus, "is not some externality... the self has a conception of God and yet does not will as he wills... what really makes human guilt into sin is that the guilty one has the consciousness of existing before God."⁸¹⁹ In other words, it is impossible for the self to avoid responsibility if it is truly related to an absolute Good. To those who would replace God with some other absolute Good deemed to be sufficient for self-actualization, Kierkegaard refers back to the metaphysical implications of committing oneself to any source that demands responsibility. If we hope to avoid the rational problems associated with some self-positing ethical principles, then we must admit our principle is based on something

⁸¹⁸ *SUD*, p. 17/*SKS* 11, p. 133, emphasis in original.

⁸¹⁹ *SUD*, p. 80/*SKS* 11, p. 194.

like faith. But this implies that we cannot simply decide to follow our own rational conception of possibility or ethics; there is a ground to which we must be responsible, and failure to do so results in a fundamental disconnect between ourselves and that ground, one that cannot be re-established by our own power.

Kantian ethics posits a categorical imperative to which all rational agents must be responsible. Kierkegaard responds that if Kant is wrong about our rational access to objective ethical principles, then we can never be satisfied with our imperfect striving toward ethical imperatives, since we have no way to objectively assess what is expected of us in the first place. We must place our faith in a ground of expectation, by virtue of which our responsibilities are established. Correlatively, our selfhood is established in our relation to that ground. Thus, to get rid of God is to reduce the overall quality of the self.⁸²⁰ A self without God is simply not a genuine self. As Hannay puts it, “[A] person manufactures his or her own identity in vain. And this is a central feature of Kierkegaard’s account of despair.”⁸²¹ The despair of wanting to be oneself and the despair of *not* wanting to be oneself, then, ultimately boil down to the same thing: an unwillingness on the part of the self to admit its utter dependency on God. One can respond, of course, by positing ethical grounds other than God, but to the extent that these remain questionable, Kierkegaard’s divine ground remains an option that should not be discarded merely because it does not cohere with one’s prior metaphysical commitments.

Possibility in the Religious Sphere

It appears, then, that we do not have the freedom to finally actualize our selfhood. This

⁸²⁰ “[T]he self is intensified in relation to the criterion for the self... In fact, the greater the conception of God, the more self there is; the more self, the greater the conception of God.” (*SUD*, p. 80/*SKS* 11, p. 194.)

⁸²¹ *SD*, Translator’s Introduction, p. 13.

may seem directly opposed to Kierkegaard's own commitment to existential decision and subjective truth. But Kierkegaard believed it is only by accepting our inability and admitting our dependence on God that our selfhood can actually be achieved. We do have freedom; our freedom grounds us in the God who makes possible what is otherwise impossible for us. We must not confuse the metaphysical freedom (and possibility) that we have by virtue of our relation to God with the existential freedom (and possibility) that allows us to commit ourselves to that relation. The latter is ultimately a freedom to relinquish our freedom, so to speak. It involves the existential decision to admit our lack while not mistakenly establishing ourselves, either by means of logical necessity or ethical universals, as the ultimate arbiters of our metaphysical situation. The former is the freedom of God to save us and return to us the metaphysical possibilities that we have lost. This freedom is, for existing finite human beings, only found in faith. And faith, states Kierkegaard, "is essentially this—to hold fast to possibility."⁸²²

Anti-Climacus proclaims: "What is decisive is that with God everything is possible. This is eternally true and consequently true every moment."⁸²³ Because all things are possible with God, the self has a reason to hope in the fulfillment of its selfhood and its telos. (If God is not actually involved with human existence, then our only other option is not a Hegelian optimism, but a pragmatic or nihilistic resignation.) Faith and hope are thus intimately connected. In what does religious hope consist? In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard directly links hope with possibility; possibility, he says, is synonymous with the future, and exhibits an openness that makes hope possible.⁸²⁴ That is, hope stems from possibility, as a feature of possibility itself. Religious hope

⁸²² *JP* 1126/*Pap IX A* 311, *n.d.*, 1848.

⁸²³ *SUD*, p. 38/*SKS* 11, p. 154.

⁸²⁴ "To hope relates to the future, to possibility, which in turn, unlike actuality, is always a duality, the possibility of advance or of retrogression, of rising or falling, of good or of evil... the future is the possible; eternally, the eternal

is related to metaphysical possibility as well as existential possibility. But the possibility that gives birth to hope may just as easily give birth to fear. This duality is part of the very essence of possibility.⁸²⁵ So, says Kierkegaard, “To relate oneself expectantly to the possibility of the good is to *hope*, which for that very reason cannot be any temporal expectancy but is an eternal hope. To relate oneself expectantly to the possibility of evil is to *fear*.”⁸²⁶

Both hope and fear involve expectation: in the former, there is the expectation of good, in the latter, the expectation of evil. But Kierkegaard states further that with hope “the possible is changed, because the possibility of the good is the eternal.”⁸²⁷ This is an important reminder that Kierkegaard’s metaphysics relates possibility to the eternal. Eternality also has a dual nature, in which both the temporal and the atemporal are united. However, the latter infinitely exceeds the former. It is also vital that we remember that hope is the *possibility of the good*, not mere possibility. As Kierkegaard explains, “Only in mere possibility, that is, only for the merely or indifferently [*Ligegyldig*] expecting person, are the possibilities of the good and the evil equal [*ligelig*]; in the differentiation (and the choice is indeed differentiating) the possibility of the good is more than a possibility, because it is the eternal. That is why the person who hopes can never be deceived, because to hope is to expect the possibility of the good, but the possibility of the good is the eternal.”⁸²⁸ This means that Kierkegaardian possibility cannot be reduced to metaphysical ‘openness’. Louis Dupre rightly notes that for Kierkegaard “the ultimate category of selfhood is not infinite *possibility*, that is, indefinite openness, but *eternity*... The relation to the eternal which concludes the constitution of selfhood has no dialectical counterpart.”⁸²⁹

is the eternal; in time, the eternal is the possible, the future... The possible as such is always a duality, and in possibility the eternal always relates itself equally to its duality.” (*WL*, p. 249/*SKS* 9, p. 249.)

⁸²⁵ Ibid.

⁸²⁶ Ibid, emphasis in original.

⁸²⁷ *WL*, p. 249/*SKS* 9, p. 250.

⁸²⁸ *WL*, p. 250/*SKS* 9, p. 250.

⁸²⁹ Louis Dupre. “Of Time and Eternity in Kierkegaard’s Concept of Anxiety.” *Faith and Philosophy*, Vol. 1, No. 2,

Nevertheless, incompleteness remains inasmuch as our hope remains unfulfilled. And, according to Kierkegaard, the Christian hope is found not only in experiences of joy and nearness to God, but equally in experiences of suffering and distance from God.⁸³⁰ Indeed, this is the way that possibility is actualized for the self: “The eternal, in the proper sense, continually assigns in possibility just a small part at a time. By means of the possible, eternity is continually *near* enough to be available and yet *distant enough* to keep the human being in motion forward toward the eternal... This is how eternity lures and draws a person, in possibility, from the cradle to the grave—provided he chooses to hope.”⁸³¹ Hope, then, is the self’s expression of the faith one has in the God for whom all things are possible. This is necessary for the proper expression of hope: “with the help of hope, possibility will bring up to hope the person who chooses hope. Yet the possibility of fear, the rigorousness, remains secretly present as a possibility, if it should come to be needed, for the sake of the upbringing, in order to awaken... To lure is continually to be just as *near as distant*; in this way the one who hopes is always kept hoping, hoping all things, is kept in hope for the eternal, which in temporality is the possible.”⁸³²

Expectancy, then, is the proper relation to the eternal. One must be patient, since it may appear as though the eternal will never arrive.⁸³³ But waiting for what never seems to arrive is a most difficult trial to endure. When should we admit that our patience is foolish and our hope is unfounded? The offense of faith is acutely present in this dilemma, and Kierkegaard does not

1984, p. 168. Kierkegaardian possibility is thus not a type of Derridean ‘Messianism’, as it is unreasonable to expect that a God who is always hoped for but never arrives can truly bring about the transformation of the present. Instead, this seems to place the responsibility upon human beings for enacting the presence of a hope that may never come.

⁸³⁰ See WA, pp. 131-33/SKS 11, pp. 265-67; UDVS, pp. 231, 234-37, 246/SKS 8, p. 332, 335-37, 345. In Walsh’s words: “Suffering constitutes the crowning mark of Christian existence in Kierkegaard’s thought.” (Walsh, *Living Christianly*, p. 113.)

⁸³¹ WL, p. 253/SKS 9, p. 252, emphasis in original.

⁸³² WL, p. 253/SKS 9, p. 252-53, emphasis in original.

⁸³³ As Pattison puts it: “as long as we live in time... who or what we are is still open to revision and change... Our end can never be had other than in what Kierkegaard calls the mode of ‘anticipation’. My ‘actuality’, then, is not the actuality of a fully realized potential. It is itself a process of actualization whose end is not yet given... this dialectical moment can never be resolved into a stable outcome.” (Pattison, *Philosophy of Kierkegaard*, p. 41.)

attempt to solve the paradox of faith. Instead, he suggests that one who does not hope all things—that is, one who does not always seek the possibility of the good—is dealing with “something that prevents him from keeping the possibility pure.”⁸³⁴ For, “if possibility is kept pure, everything is possible.”⁸³⁵ What does it mean for possibility to be pure? In context, it means always seeking and choosing the good of the other person. But to always choose the good of the other, I must presumably be motivated by the absolute Good, which provides the epistemic and metaphysical possibilities that I would otherwise lack. Otherwise, I will inevitably fall back into despair.⁸³⁶ Again, it all comes down to the source; in order for possibility to be sustained, I must be grounded in that which is ‘that all things are possible’.

The Double-Movement of the Self Before God

The dialectic of possibility plays out both existentially and metaphysically; indeed, at times it is difficult to distinguish between the two in Kierkegaard’s writings. Climacus, for instance, describes the movement from Religiousness A to Religiousness B as a process of “self-annihilation before God.”⁸³⁷ The difference is that in B, the “paradoxical-dialectical,” we find “every remnant of original immanence annihilated, and all connection cut away, and the individual situated at the edge of existence... This paradoxical inwardness is the greatest possible, because even the most dialectical qualification, if it is still within immanence, has, at it were, a possibility of escape.”⁸³⁸ The paradox offers no means of escape because all remaining

⁸³⁴ *WL*, p. 256/*SKS* 9, p. 256.

⁸³⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸³⁶ “Anyone... who lives without possibility is in despair. He breaks with the eternal and arbitrarily puts an end to possibility; without the consent of eternity, he ends where the end is not.” (*WL*, p. 252/*SKS* 9, p. 252.)

⁸³⁷ *CUP*, p. 572/*SKS* 7, p. 519.

⁸³⁸ *CUP*, p. 572/*SKS* 7, p. 520.

existential possibilities have been annihilated, not by their actualization, but rather by the self's 'letting go' of its own possibilities in a manner that allows the self to be fully established in a single ground, the God for whom all things are possible. In other words, the religious self existentially 'loses' itself in order to 'find' itself, and all of its possibilities—including aesthetic and ethical possibilities—are restored and fulfilled in God, not in an empirical manner (that would be the return of immanence), but through the passionate commitment of religious faith.

Thus, says Climacus, the paradoxical-religious "makes existing the absolute contradiction... There is no immanent underlying kinship between the temporal and the eternal, because the eternal itself has entered into time and wants to establish kinship there."⁸³⁹ This absolute contradiction is framed in terms of self-annihilation, one of Kierkegaard's most controversial images of self-becoming. In his discourse 'To Need God is a Human Being's Highest Perfection', Kierkegaard provocatively suggests that the battle against oneself leads to the 'annihilation' of the person and "this annihilation is his truth."⁸⁴⁰ This, I suggest, is analogous to the annihilation that occurs as possibility faces actuality.⁸⁴¹ If this is so, then it seems that, in the annihilation of the self, the tension between the possible and necessary sides of the self leads to the destruction of the self's possibility. This takes place in repentance and recognition of one's helplessness without God. However, when the annihilation occurs, the possibility of one's sin is annihilated as well in forgiveness and the possibility and freedom of God begin the process of re-constituting the self in terms of God's possibility.

This idea of self-annihilation is not strictly literal; it must be framed within the context of his metaphysics of possibility. Clearly, the self continues in the process of becoming inasmuch as it continues to be affected by causal physical chains. Kierkegaard is not denying this. His claim

⁸³⁹ *CUP*, p. 572-73/*SKS* 7, p. 520-21.

⁸⁴⁰ *EUD*, p. 309/*SKS* 5, p. 302.

⁸⁴¹ Kierkegaard uses a form of the same Danish word (*Tilintetgjørelse*) in both texts.

is that a particular level of possibility—existential possibility—is annihilated by the self’s admission of its radical incompleteness and responds in a manner appropriate to its finitude: it grounds itself in that which is the source of all possibilities, including the possibility of selfhood. Thus, when Anti-Climacus claims that in order to avoid despair the self “must at every moment destroy the possibility,”⁸⁴² and that the self cannot be “in equilibrium and rest by itself, but only, in relating itself to itself, by relating itself to that which has established the entire relation,”⁸⁴³ he is in effect arguing that God, the ground who has established the relation, annihilates the possibility of despair, and the self rests in that metaphysical reality by willingly surrendering itself to God, who is that all things are possible. In this sense, the self has no existential possibilities of its own, because God provides them all.

Again, this is not something that can be deduced logically or empirically; it can only be believed in faith. This faith leads to a particular result: the imitation of Christ. When Kierkegaard says that we are to imitate Christ, he is not suggesting that imitation establishes the self by somehow catalyzing the actualization of its possibilities. Rather, the imitation that takes place as a result of the self’s being grounded in God opens the self to its possibilities. It is not the action but the motivation for the action that finally matters, and only the self (and God) can be aware of its own motives. Motives are vital for faithful action because there the self’s openness to God is discovered, and the possibility of imitating Christ takes place by virtue of one’s openness to that possibility.⁸⁴⁴ This openness comes from the willingness to allow the annihilation of one’s possibility so that God’s possibility is free to make possible the impossible; namely, the complete actualization of the self.

God in Christ desires this self-actualization and operates on our behalf to make it so.

⁸⁴² *SUD*, p. 15/*SKS* 11, p. 131.

⁸⁴³ *SUD*, p. 14/*SKS* 11, p. 130.

⁸⁴⁴ For the human being, “will is... in the ultimate sense the decisive condition.” (*PC*, p. 186/*SKS* 12, p. 186.)

Kierkegaard makes this plain in *Practice in Christianity*, where he states, “Christ also first and foremost wants to help every human being to become a self, requires this of him first and foremost, requires that he, by repenting, become a self, in order then to draw him to himself. He wants to draw the human being to himself, but in order truly to draw him to himself he wants to draw him only as a free being to himself, that is, through a choice.”⁸⁴⁵ This ‘choice’ has sometimes been taken to indicate that Kierkegaard is a proponent of the kind of soteriological freedom associated with Pelagianism. But on the picture that I have sketched, Kierkegaard is saying no such thing. A free decision for Christ is not an attempt to imitate him on our own terms, but is a commitment to abandonment, not in an ascetic, self-flagellating manner, but in a willingness to offer up our existential possibilities for annihilation so that the God for whom all things are possible may redeem us and provide us what we cannot provide for ourselves: complete self-actualization.

This hopefully alleviates the theological concern that Christ’s uniqueness as the God-man who redeems humanity through his sacrificial death and resurrection is threatened by the claim that human beings also have an inherent ability to emulate Christ’s actions. It recognizes that human beings are endowed with a capacity to act in ways that are in concert with that redemption. It remains the case that there is a mystery here; only Christ, being fully human and fully divine, is able to perfectly unify in himself both the self-annihilation that opens the individual to the possibility of God and that divine possibility itself, which actualizes the return of all possibilities for the self. Hence it is only possible for us to live as God desires if God (in Christ) somehow ‘lives in us’ and completes our selfhood.⁸⁴⁶ This may lead some to infer that human beings cannot be held accountable for any failure to properly relate our possibilities to

⁸⁴⁵ *PC*, p. 160/*SKS* 12, p. 163-64.

⁸⁴⁶ As Carlisle puts it, “the teacher—and the teaching—of the Incarnation possesses *actualizing power*.” (Carlisle, p. 123, emphasis in original.)

our selfhood. How could we? We are not Christ. But, as Kierkegaard hints throughout his authorship, Christ gives us the ability to be what we could never be otherwise—genuinely religious selves, complete selves by virtue of our groundedness in God.⁸⁴⁷ Our responsibility is found in whether we decide to respond in faith to the ultimate paradox or remain offended by that paradox.

Summary

I have argued that the Kierkegaardian self only finds completion in the religious sphere of existence; that is, the self's possibilities can only be actualized by God. This is an ongoing task, one that is never temporally completed. At the end of *Repetition*, Constantin Constantius admits that the only solution for his young pen-pal may be a 'God-relationship'.⁸⁴⁸ As both the text and Kierkegaard's own experience with Regine suggest, "The only possible solution, given the circumstances, is in fact an *impossible* one."⁸⁴⁹ The impossibility of becoming a 'new creation' is the only hope of genuine repetition. Although we may aesthetically or ethically attempt repetition, only God can truly actualize the possibilities desired by the person who seeks to repeat actuality. How? By giving the person a genuinely new existence through the actualization of possibilities that are otherwise impossible. This new existence is also what drives the articulations of the moment found in *The Concept of Anxiety*. As Hannay points out, Haufniensis's descriptions of the moment are tied up with "the Christian view that non-Being is already here and not in some limbo waiting to be transformed into Being... By acquiring a sense of the instant as 'now', and not abstracted from a spatialized continuum but as containing both

⁸⁴⁷ See *PC*, p. 62ff/SKS 12, p. 74ff; *SUD*, p. 14ff/SKS 11, p. 130ff.

⁸⁴⁸ *R*, p. 230/SKS 4, p. 95.

⁸⁴⁹ Hannay, *Kierkegaard* (2001), p. 202, emphasis in original.

past and future, we synthesize the temporal and eternal by incorporating the latter into the former.”⁸⁵⁰ This is Kierkegaard’s ‘moment’, which is only possible if we admit a metaphysical ground that sustains both being and non-being; the God for whom all things are possible.⁸⁵¹

⁸⁵⁰ Hannay, *Kierkegaard* (2001), p. 222.

⁸⁵¹ I recognize that much more may be said about the existential encounter with God and its concrete embodiment in the individual. Regrettably, I am unable to fully address these matters here.

Conclusion: To Will One Possibility

Purity of Heart is to 'Will One Possibility'

This dissertation has charted a course beginning with the unearthing of Kierkegaard's metaphysics of possibility through to the implications of that metaphysics for the actualization of the human self. I have argued that the possible self, for Kierkegaard, can only be fully actualized to the extent that its selfhood is ultimately provided by an external 'Absolute' source. This source, according to Kierkegaard, can be reasonably expected to be the Christian God. But where does this leave us? If the human being is, by faith, grounded in the Absolute that sustains it, then that human self is apparently becoming a self because the Absolute actualizes the self's possibilities for it. But does this not threaten the freedom and possibility that are central to Kierkegaard's metaphysics? The answer, as I have suggested, is that the self expresses its freedom to the extent that the self rests in God and freely chooses *not to actualize* its possibilities independently from this ground. The self is cognizant of its own inability to reach the goal of complete actualization that it seeks. This leads to an anthropological and ontological grounding in the God who is that all things are possible. It is this ongoing faithful commitment that alone brings genuine selfhood and fulfillment.

Perhaps, then, we can—adapting the title of Kierkegaard's well known discourse—say that 'purity of heart is to will one *possibility*.' That is, if purity of heart is indeed willing one thing, this clearly depends on what that 'one thing' is. Kierkegaard states in his discourse that the one thing is to will the absolute Good. The absolute Good is, for him, ultimately the Christian God.⁸⁵² And this God is, strictly speaking, the impossible, at least when it comes to establishing

⁸⁵² *UDVS*, p. 39/*SKS* 8, p. 151: "That the good is its own reward, yes, that is eternally certain. There is nothing so certain; it is not more certain that there is a God, because this is one and the same."

God's existence purely through rational or empirical means.⁸⁵³ Where does this leave us? We are to paradoxically view the impossible as a possibility, and ground ourselves by faith entirely in that one possibility. The offense one experiences results from the inevitable clash with reason and ethics as one strives to relinquish all other possibilities for the sake of God. Anxiety is the inevitable consequence of a self, awakened to freedom's possibility, which willingly relinquishes its own possibility because, in faith, it acknowledges that all possibilities, except God, will fail to actualize its absolute Good.

Is the call to become nothing, then, an annihilation of the self in God? Perhaps in one sense, but Christianity also claims that the self is made new or 'reborn' in God. As George Pattison notes, "The very possibility of our being made in and restored to being the image of and likeness of God depends upon the suspension of the structure of subject-object relationships that holds in all intra-worldly relationships."⁸⁵⁴ This suspension of structure is not metaphysical chaos; there is a teleological metaphysical dimension in Kierkegaard's thought here. However, there is no way to verify the structure of this dimension in immediate terms. Pattison queries whether this leads to a further problem. That is, is the paradox "something that can be dialectically mapped? Or does this mark the point of breakdown of dialectical construction?"⁸⁵⁵ He points out that Kierkegaard is often accused of having a cut-off or 'truncated' dialectic wherein the opposing poles "do not serve to bring about a harmony or synthesis... but end in a moment of breakdown that apparently resists reconciliation or reintegration."⁸⁵⁶ However, Kierkegaard's proposed solution—the Christian God—ironically makes his dialectic seem more

⁸⁵³ Again, this does *not* mean that rational or empirical arguments for God serve no purpose.

⁸⁵⁴ Pattison, *Kierkegaard's Upbuilding Discourses*, p. 60.

⁸⁵⁵ Pattison, p. 67.

⁸⁵⁶ Pattison, p.68.

deterministic, and more Hegelian, than Kierkegaard himself would want to allow.⁸⁵⁷

In other words, does Kierkegaard need a negative or cut-off dialectic in order to guarantee the qualitative movement by which God intervenes? Is he privileging a certain metaphysical picture because it fits with his presupposed theological conceptions of God and humanity? The answer, it seems, is ‘yes and no’. Pattison rightly states that Kierkegaard is navigating between the two horns of a dilemma: the impossibility of ontological and moral self-grounding on the one hand, and the utter annihilation of the self before God on the other. In order to be a self *before God*, there must be a *self* in some sense, but this self is not self-establishing. But, Pattison asks, “how can the self choose its nothingness in the light of an active self-reflecting reflection, without thereby excluding itself from the kind of receptivity for which the religious requirement of dependence on God calls?”⁸⁵⁸ That is, how can one choose to give up oneself entirely, and still be in a state of surrender to God? This is not only a paradox of Kierkegaardian selfhood, it is a paradox of Christian existence.

A Christian believer might, as Kierkegaard does, point again to Christ as the source and exemplar of the life of faith. Pattison, however, counters, “If the highest potentiation of a self is that it understands itself as the recipient of God’s favour in the incarnate Christ, then it would seem that the highest degree of selfhood is, as it were, reserved only for those who can make the Christian confession of faith... [but] Faith in Christ does not simply explode in our faces... Rather, it comes as the final expression of a process of understanding that is firmly and broadly contextualised in human experience.”⁸⁵⁹ Pattison is surely right, but does this need to be an

⁸⁵⁷ “When... Kierkegaard speaks of faith as a new or higher immediacy... is this the sign of a dialectical model delivering a predetermined result... is the moment of becoming transparent to God a predictable outcome of the breakdown of the two poles of the self (the inner and the outer person)? Is what we see happening here the outworking of some divine mechanism?” (Pattison, p. 68.)

⁸⁵⁸ Pattison, p. 101.

⁸⁵⁹ Pattison, p. 205.

either/or? It seems reasonable to say that faith in Christ may come in many different ways, as varied as each individual's selfhood. These ways might include 'explosions' of faith, but may also include possibilities that are unimaginable to us. So, from a theological perspective, Pattison's point about context must be expanded as far as possible without losing sight of the centrality of Christ, if we are to remain faithful both to Kierkegaard's view and Christian faith. This leaves us with the tension of unknown possibilities waiting to be actualized, but, then, that is the entire point of the journey of faith.

Kierkegaard's metaphysics of possibility is thus theologically generous. It also cuts across readings of Kierkegaard that ultimately view him as a radical isolationist. To the extent that one's selfhood is existentially and ontologically dependent upon God, that selfhood is not a purely individual matter. Moreover, presumably an absolutely good God desires to redeem the whole of creation. Accordingly, it seems reasonable to conclude that the more good possibilities God actualizes, the more redemption takes place. In sum, Kierkegaard's insistence in *Works of Love* that love seeks the good of the other is consonant with his metaphysics of possibility.⁸⁶⁰ While many questions certainly remain regarding the relation of possibility to Kierkegaard's understanding of God's character, the nature of revelation, the Incarnation of Christ, and the role of Christ in the life of the believer, I am confident that this analysis of Kierkegaard's metaphysics of possibility is not only beneficial for those desiring a better understanding of what motivated Kierkegaard's views on freedom, God, and the self, it also offers much philosophical and theological food for thought that I trust will be taken up for further consideration in the future.

⁸⁶⁰ Consider *WL*, p. 376ff/*SKS* 9, p. 369ff, where Kierkegaard describes the God-relationship as the paradigm for all other loving relationships. Given the commitment to the possibility of the 'impossible' in the God-relationship, it seems that same commitment ought to motivate the person of faith in their relationships with other human beings.

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