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“ ‘Let me be as though created for a whim, this is the jest; and yet I would will the ethical to the utmost of my ability, this is the earnest; and I want nothing else, absolutely nothing. Oh, insignificant significance, Oh, sportive earnest, Oh, blessed fear and trembling!’ ”

Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*

Letter from the Editor

May 5th, 2013 marked the 200th birthday of Søren Kierkegaard, to whom we dedicate this year's edition of *The Reed*. Though his work is perhaps unfamiliar to many, it nevertheless contends with the challenges that we all face by merely existing. Later termed the father of existentialism, Kierkegaard created a branch of philosophy that ponders what it means to live and to die. In the wake of World War II's destruction, philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus emerged forming a new branch of existentialism. Both Camus and Sartre drastically differ from Kierkegaard, but were deeply concerned with the question that Kierkegaard originally posed: "in case life mocks me should I become so erudite as to have forgotten to understand what will happen to me sometime, and happens sometime to every human being"?¹

Within this journal, you will find papers exploring a broad range of existentialist themes. Some readers may be deeply intimate with the topics contained herein, while some may have never encountered existentialism before. Regardless of experience, these themes become the profound articulation of being overwhelmed by existence.

Katherine Kihs, 2013

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. Alastair Hannay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 139.

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The Distinction between Faith and the Father of Faith

Allison Rodriguez

In *Fear and Trembling* and "The Lord Gave, the Lord Took Away,"¹ Søren Kierkegaard² examines the stories of Abraham and Job as lessons of faith for humanity. He describes Job as a "teacher and guide of humankind" who "left humankind only himself as a prototype."³ Job's actions make him great and worthy to be studied by one pursuing a relationship with the Lord that goes beyond love, to the commitment of faith. Similarly, Abraham's actions mark him as a paradigm of faith; they are why de Silentio calls him the, "Second father to the human race!"⁴ Each man responds to trials from God, and their responses embody Kierkegaard's notion of faith. However, to simply name either situation a trial does not sufficiently articulate faith. Kierkegaard claims that in studying both men, one must focus on the disparity and anguish present in their situations. Further, one must realize that, despite their agony, the men remain unchanged in their relationship to the Lord, and consequently to the world. Why then is only Abraham the "father of faith"? What difference in the narratives supports de Silentio's claim that, "There was one who was great in his strength, and one who was great in his wisdom, and one who was great in hope, and one who was great in love; but greater than all was Abraham?"⁵

The answer lies in Abraham's act. While Job faces the paradox inherent to human life, the combination of the infinite and the finite, and responds to it with faith (unchanged in his relation to God), Abraham goes further. He acts on the strength of the paradox's absurdity. Job fully confronts his loss, making the movement of infinity, and then confirms his joy in the finite world by giving thanks to the Lord, thus maintaining his intimacy with the Lord. Abraham also recognizes that it is the Lord who gives to and who takes all from humanity, but distinguishes himself in acting *because of*

1. The first section from *Four Upbuilding Discourses* (1843).

2. Kierkegaard notably chooses to write *Fear and Trembling* under the pseudonym, Johannes de Silentio. The persona he adopts in this discourse is significantly distinct from his personal voice, to help demonstrate why Abraham is not only enigmatic of faith, but the father of faith.

3. Søren Kierkegaard, "The Lord Gave, The Lord Took Away," in *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 109.

4. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair Hannay (New York: Penguin, 2005), 280.

5. *Ibid.*, 177.

this contradiction. He, too, faces the loss of everything, but by his very own hand. Abraham's actions contain utter incommensurability. Job's story explains that true faith must accept the resignation, but Abraham epitomizes what a person of faith must do—assert oneself above the universal. Abraham as *the* knight of faith must show that his spiritual expression eclipses the logical, and even the ethical.⁶ Job may speak to the absurdity of having faith, but only Abraham shows what a commitment to faith and its absurdity requires in his actions.

In order to understand Abraham's preeminence in faith, we must first understand faith as a wholly subjective act. Kierkegaard's treatment of Job emphasizes the existential characteristic of faith. He claims, "Job's significance consists not in his having said it [the proverb] but in his having acted upon it."⁸ Immediately, Kierkegaard informs us that a message of faith will not be explicitly stated, but implicitly revealed through actions. Moreover, the lesson from Job's reaction is not restricted to a contemporary (with Job) perspective for comprehension. The world's indifference toward human affairs and suffering pervades all generations:

In tempestuous times, when the foundation of existence is tottering, when the moment shivers in anxious expectancy of what may come, when every explanation falls silent at the spectacle of the wild tumult, when a person's innermost being groans in despair and 'in bitterness of soul' cries to heaven, then Job still walks along.⁹

Already, some substantial requirements for understanding faith begin to take shape: it must be interpreted through actions and not be restricted to any specific time period or situation.

Furthermore, the actions must respond to a trial, which Job undergoes, and it is this response that reveals faith or its absence. However, Kierkegaard explains that using the common term "trial" alone does not accurately explain faith's requirements. The phrase leads to a childlike¹⁰ and deficient

6. Spirituality's place above ethics relates directly to de Silentio's critique of Hegelian philosophy. He claims that if Hegelian philosophy is correct and "das Aussere [the outer, the externalization] is higher than das Innere [the inner]", then Hegel has no right to refer to Abraham as the father of faith. In this philosophic tradition, Abraham, an individual who put himself above the universal duty of a father to his son, should rather be considered a murderer.⁷

7. Ibid., 917.

8. Kierkegaard, "The Lord Gave," 111.

9. Ibid.

10. Kierkegaard literally compares this understanding to that of a child examining Job.

simplification: God tried Job and his faith was strong enough to survive the test. The "distress and affliction in which Job was tested" complicates this, but not in order to defame Job's faith.¹¹ In fact, Kierkegaard states, "how fortunate the youth who understood the [Job's] saying and humbly bowed under what he did not understand before distress made his thought obstinate", meaning that an educated and skeptical analysis of Job's distressed psyche will only dampen the significance of his actions.¹² Misunderstanding the pain and anguish Job felt during his trial with his actions of faith does not bring us to Kierkegaard's notion of faith. We must consider the difficulty Job felt not as indicative of faith/not faith in itself, but in conjunction with what Kierkegaard means by action: "what the simplest person is able to do just as well as the very wise."¹³ We must return to Job's specific actions in order to see how his anguish properly explains faith's character, without letting it make us "suspicious" of his status as a prototype for faith.

Before the trial, Job lived completely and happily: he had a large family, a well respected position in his society, a fine home, and a close relationship with the Lord.¹⁴ This characterization indicates the theme of commonality in the story—not even individuals who *seem* more fortunate are immune to disaster. Anyone can undergo Job's transformation. After his horrifying discovery, Job does not speak, but acts without hesitation. First he strips himself of all adornment in order to proclaim, "Naked I came from my mother's womb and naked I shall return."¹⁶ This first action and verbal confirmation is the infinite movement of resignation. Kierkegaard describes this infinite move as one in which, "every demand was silenced that would claim from the Lord something he was unwilling to give."¹⁷ Job gives up any hope for the tragedy's reversal, accepting the base vulnerability of infancy.

De Silentio develops a more explicit account of resignation than that of Kierkegaard. I believe this additional information clarifies what an infinite movement means and requires for Job and others undergoing spiritual

11. Ibid., 112.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid., 113.

14. In fact on the very day misery befell his home, he had been offering "a burnt sacrifice" to God for the sake of his children's good grace.¹⁵

15. Ibid., 114.

16. Job 1:21.

17. Kierkegaard, "The Lord Gave," 115.

trials. Like the knight of infinite resignation, Job recognizes, "Everything is possible spiritually speaking, but in the finite world there is much that is not possible."¹⁸ This first movement, admitting the trial's impossibility (for Job, the impossibility of getting his family back in this world) is the source of anguish for the tried individual. Job could have, "cravenly avoided any humble striving to reconcile himself to the loss", he could have simply ignored the impossibility, but then he would not be admirable.¹⁹ Had Job acted differently, to believe he could have his life back, he would be a weak or naïve, possibly mad character for, "it requires strength and energy and freedom of spirit to make the infinite movement of resignation."²⁰

The subsequent line in Job's speech shows that not only does Job make the movement of resignation, but he goes beyond this to the movement of faith. Even the specific ordering of these brief statements becomes key to faith's explanation. Job faces the impossibility of gaining his prosperity back, but this does not diminish the glory of his finite life and happiness. After the initial movement, he identifies God as the only cause for his joy: "The Lord gave." Kierkegaard explains,

The statement is brief, but in its brevity it effectually points out what it is supposed to point out, that Job's soul was not squeezed into silent subjection to the sorrow, but that his heart first expanded in thankfulness, the first thing the loss of everything did was to make him thankful to the Lord that he had given him all the blessings that he now took away from him.²¹

Job does not simply resign himself to the situation. He sees the reality of it, but this does not defeat him. It is not in the pain of resignation that Job finds comfort and respite—his peace comes from every joyous thing God has given and gives to him in the finite world. He confronts his loss without giving up the world or the beauty of its gifts, which are always from the Lord. In fact, Kierkegaard maintains that by recognizing that the Lord gives *before* he states that the Lord takes, Job reflects, "with perhaps even more thankfulness than when he had received [the gifts]."²²

Next, Job proclaims the paradox of faith for humanity. "The Lord gave, and the Lord took away." The statement juxtaposes the infinite and

omnipotent Lord who inscrutably places us in an indifferent world, plagued by loss and countless impossibilities. Job's expression relates the impossible and possible, the infinite and the finite that together make up an individual's life. And, all of this is always inexplicably contained in the Lord—that is the paradox. True faith demands understanding this duality inherent in human existence. To highlight this, Kierkegaard presents another disparate way Job could have acted.²³ Job could have recognized that the Lord gave, but could have decided that the weather, other people, demons etc. took away. To admit forces outside of the Lord, one reduces His omnipotence. What Job actually does is far greater because, in his words, everything ultimately rests with the Lord. Kierkegaard places Job's significance in his recognition of God as the absolute source of everything:

The very moment everything was taken away from him, he knew it was the Lord who had taken it away from him, he knew it was the Lord who had taken it away, and therefore in his loss he maintained intimacy with the Lord; he saw the Lord, and therefore he did not see despair.²⁴

He understands the Lord in the fullest sense—the only One responsible for all existence, for the gifts and the tragedy alike. Faith requires this disjunction.

Further, faith cannot commit to the disparity of life's tragedies, for what more would this be than straightforward resignation? Faith goes beyond this resignation,²⁵ or, if it does not, the highest movement would be that of infinity and the best people would be without joy in life. They would have strength to make the movement, but a perpetual sadness would keep them from any visceral joy. The best of us would be constantly waiting for entry to the eternal realm of possibility. Job's joy, which remains even after his tragedy, is how he "had overcome the world" instead of submitting to it.²⁶ His final declaration, "Blessed be the name of the Lord," confirms this. After everything—his tragedy, his resignation, and his recognition of the paradox—Job remains unchanged in his relationship to God. The Lord gave and took away, but "did not take everything away, for he did not

23. Ibid., 119.

24. Ibid., 121.

25. This idea more readily applies to de Silentio's discourse on Abraham. In it, the philosopher explicitly details why faith must be higher than anything else (specifically, the ethical). The discourse on Job more or less assumes faith is the utmost. For a proper account of Abraham, however, de Silentio must argue for faith's place above ethics. Abraham's actions have to be seen as a teleological suspension of the ethical. Or else, his tale is not just lost but vicious—a murder. I will expand on this in the following sections.

26. Ibid.

18. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 537.

19. Kierkegaard, "The Lord Gave," 118.

20. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 601.

21. Kierkegaard, "The Lord Gave," 116.

22. Ibid.

take praise away from him, and he did not take away peace in the heart, the bold confidence in faith from which it proceeded, but intimacy with the Lord was still his as before."²⁷

In this discourse, Kierkegaard gives us a thorough account of what a trial of faith requires. First, one must see the impossibility in the situation and with this, all its suffering; next, one moves beyond resignation to the paradox, accepting that God is fully responsible for all our success and misery; finally, the tried individual must remain steadfast and joyous, despite the agony, by virtue of his or her relationship to the absolute. Though Job makes every movement successfully, he still cannot be Abraham. Though his story is surely no small matter, "we quite properly call Job a teacher of humankind", while we give Abraham reign over all of faith as its "father."²⁸ Job exclaimed his gratitude in the face of absurdity, but he acts in response to and *not because of* the paradox. For Kierkegaard's existential theology, everything is revealed and understood through action. Therefore, acting due to the absurdity is the greatest of all expressions of faith: to abandon the ethics that rules finitude for a higher end in the religious, despite it being nonsensical in universal expression.

De Silentio describes Abraham with all the same movements that Kierkegaard identifies in Job's account. Like Job, Abraham undergoes a trial at the hand of the Lord: "The old man was not to lay his hand upon Isaac in blessing, but weary of life was to lay it upon him in violence. And it was God who tried Him."²⁹ In the "Attunement," de Silentio lists the various other ways Abraham may have acted when faced with the terrible task of sacrificing his only son. These dissenting actions would not have been indicative of faith due to a misstep in movement—a loss of joy when Isaac is saved, a personal sacrifice instead of the one that God demands, a hesitation before the ram takes Isaac's place. The variations in Kierkegaard's analysis of Job reveal that all proper movements must be made to confirm faith through trial.

Abraham makes the proper movements. God presents Abraham with his trial and the father of faith fully accepts it. When the first movement is made, Abraham knows completely what he must do; just as Job knows fully what he has lost, Abraham "did not doubt, he did not look in anguish

to left or right, he did not challenge heaven with his prayers."³⁰ De Silentio relates Abraham's infinite movement, but how he shirks resignation with the following movement of faith. He believes completely that he will sacrifice Isaac while *in the same moment* believes that he will remain the chosen one. Abraham moves beyond resignation to faith because he remained unchanged and still "believed and held firm to the promise", the promise that he will father God's people.³¹ He accepts the paradox, the finite and infinite, in the same moment. Abraham does not delude himself. He plans definitively to kill his only son, with all the agony attached to such a horrific act; but this he attaches in baffling union to his completely opposing infinite covenant with God.

So far, we have not strayed far from Job. Abraham makes the movement of infinity, but also recognizes the other side of the paradox, that he will get Isaac back in this world. So, he is a knight of faith and not of resignation. De Silentio speculates what a man like Abraham, someone making the infinite movement without losing the world, would look like in a quotidian setting:

Towards evening he goes home, his step tireless as a postman's. On the way it occurs to him that his wife will surely have some special little warm dish for his return, for example roast head of lamb with vegetables. [...] As it happens he hasn't a penny and yet he firmly believes his wife has that delicacy waiting for him. [...] If his wife doesn't have the dish, curiously enough he is exactly the same.³²

Like Abraham, this knight of faith's belief is unintelligible. He cannot be both impoverished *and* expecting a rich meal, but he does and so acts in absurdity. Any appeal to sensible thought and practical application renders the person of faith inscrutable. His or her actions can only be understood in reference to his or her relation to the absolute, to the Lord.

Underlying faith's various steps (the movement of infinity, the paradox, and the steadfastness) is this absolute relation to God. It is also the foundation for the difference between Abraham and Job as paradigms of faith. Job, too, had an absolute relation to the Lord; this is what gave him joy, despite his very obvious downfall. However, Job's story does not require any incommensurability, any action that cannot be articulated

30. Ibid., 264.

31. Ibid., 202.

32. Ibid., 480.

27. Ibid., 122.

28. Ibid., 112.

29. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 225.

through speech. His perpetual faith is amazing and puts him outside the universal as a single person addressing the Lord and the paradox. Beyond that, though, his actions do not directly defy any universal.

Notably different, Abraham does assert himself above the universal, for he is willing to kill his son; not the best of his possessions, but his son to whom, "the father has the highest and most sacred of obligations."³³ How could Abraham have been willing to commit such a devastating crime and simultaneously be considered the father of faith?

The answer lies in the "teleological suspension of the ethical." The ethical expression for Abraham's act is murder; he defies the ethics of a father's commitment to his son. If nothing is greater than the ethical, then, as de Silentio says, "faith has no place in existence; and faith is then a temptation, and Abraham is done for, since he gave in to it."³⁴ If Hegelian philosophy is right, and the outer must be forever be above the inner, anyone in that philosophic tradition must give up Abraham. There would be no need for any discussion of faith because an individual committing completely to universal laws and ethics would be the greatest actor possible. Ethics would have forever been the utmost, and faith would be naught. Abraham would be lost because his actions wholly violate what ethics requires—that a father loves and protects his son. If nothing can suspend the ethical, then Abraham cannot be treated as a mysteriously inexplicable exception.

De Silentio claims that this cannot be true. Abraham's absolute duty to God shows that a higher telos, or end, rests in God over the ethical. No universal describes what Abraham should do in his trial. He stands alone in order to perform his duty to God. What God demands of Abraham contains nothing universal and so, "This position cannot be mediated, for all mediation occurs precisely by virtue of the universal."³⁵ He cannot mediate his position because he cannot speak, appeal to Sarah, or explain himself in any way. He has no means to explain why he simultaneously believed what he had to do and what God had promised. As de Silentio explains, "Faith is just this paradox, that the single individual as the particular is higher than the universal, is justified before the latter, not as subordinate but superior."³⁶ Duty in the infinite sense must be beyond duty in a finite

33. Ibid., 307.

34. Ibid., 932.

35. Ibid., 727.

36. Ibid.

context. The absurdity Abraham acts upon stems from his absolute duty to the Lord. His act, then, can only be coherent and inspirational if a telos in God differs from a telos in ethics.

The paradox consists of the finite and the infinite, as Job reveals in his actions and his proverb. After his trial, Job recognizes the paradox. Abraham acts. He embodies it entirely by suspending his telos in the ethical, finite world. He does not merely position himself outside the universal, but in direct contradiction to it. Thus, as de Silentio claims, he will forever be the father of faith. Kierkegaard's alter ego explains, "the movement of faith must be made continually on the strength of the absurd, though in such a way, be it noted, that one does not lose finitude, but gains it all back."³⁷ Abraham draws the knife with the belief that he will still have his son, not in an afterlife, but in his current life. Because he acts to support this absurdity, Isaac is saved.

Job's story ends with a universal message. Kierkegaard concludes his discourse emphasizing how even those completely removed from a life like Job's can learn from the joy he gained in understanding the absurdity that the Lord gives *and* takes away. For each of us, "there is no hiding place in the whole wide world where trouble will not find you."³⁸ Anyone subject to this aspect of human experience can look to Job as a template for how they, too, can retain faith after total, despondent loss. Conversely, Abraham loses nothing; in fact, he gains everything. He does so in virtue of his traversing any universal appeal to fulfill a greater promise to the Lord through direct and unmediated action. The similarities between the stories establish the basis for Kierkegaard's notion of faith, but the difference, that Abraham does not respond to tragedy but is willing to bring his own downfall for his faith, speaks to the overwhelming commitment that true faith requires for Kierkegaard. Accepting the absurdity of human life is vital for faith, but constantly acting to reflect this recognition is the highest task for the individual in his or her relation to God.

37. Ibid., 453.

38. Kierkegaard, "The Lord Gave," 124.

Historicism in the *Phenomenology* as Interplay of Consciousness and Meaning

John Colin Bradley

To discount the importance of historicism in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* would be to fundamentally fail to grasp the scope of Hegel's ambitions. The primary thesis of historicism as I shall treat it reads: human thought and cognition is capable of radical conceptual transformation, and in fact has undergone such transformations throughout history. Chapters *Consciousness* through *Reason* of the *Phenomenology* can be read to reflect such a historicist idea. My basic interpretive claim is that it will be useful, in order to lend credibility to Hegel's historicist thesis, to consider that historicist thesis within Hegel's theory of the nature of consciousness, and his theory of the sociality of meaning. The reason for this should be fairly clear. For one, in order to make any sense of the claim that consciousness broadly construed can undergo any radical changes, it is necessary to know what we are talking about when we use the term 'consciousness'. Unsurprisingly, Hegel's understanding of consciousness and shapes of consciousness specifically allows for the sort of conceptual transformation posited by the historicist thesis. Observing the movement from one shape to another will also elucidate what I take to be a secondary historicist thesis performing crucial work in Hegel's account: each radical transformation of human cognition over time preserves and is informed by the preceding consciousnesses.

In Section I, I lay out an interpretation of Hegel's theory of consciousness based on a close reading of the *Sense-certainty* and *Perception* sections of the *Consciousness* chapter. This reading provides the framework by which the primary historicist claim becomes plausible within Hegel's theory. In Section II, I take a closer look at the *Sense-certainty* and *Perception* sections, this time focusing specifically on the *movement* of consciousness as it strives within each shape of consciousness, and as it passes from the first shape of consciousness to the second. I argue that, for the first historicist thesis to be plausible within Hegel's theory of the nature of consciousness, a *secondary* historicist thesis is therefore a necessary corollary. This secondary thesis allows for the *possibility* of radical cognitive transformation. In Section III, I make another interpretive claim, gesturing towards another facet of Hegel's thought—namely, his theory of the sociality of meaning—in order to delineate a necessary condition for

the truth of his historicist thesis.

I

To begin with Hegel's model of consciousness, we turn to the *Introduction* in which we find perhaps his most lucid explication: "For consciousness is, on the one hand, consciousness of the object, and on the other, consciousness of itself; consciousness of what for it is the True, and consciousness of its knowledge of the truth."¹ Later in the same paragraph: "Something is *for it* [i.e. for consciousness] the *in-itself*; and knowledge, or the being of the object for consciousness, is, *for it*, another moment."² Here we find three distinct moments, or components of consciousness, which represent the general structure, which all consciousness must possess. These are: (i) consciousness of self as such, (ii) consciousness of another self or object as such, and (iii) consciousness of one's own cognition and representation of the object as such. Further, these are not simply three completely distinct and independent moments. Indeed, they are intimately interdependent. First, consciousness on this model must be a consciousness of something, and that thing must be taken as real or objective. To take this thing as objective requires the concept of objectivity or being. This concept of objectivity brings with it the notion that the object is something other than the means of cognizing it; hence consciousness' awareness of its own representation of an object. Thirdly, any consciousness worth mentioning must be consciousness by some agent, or self. All three conceptual moments—object, self, representation—contain each other, all comprised by a single consciousness.

With Hegel's general model of consciousness in view, we can now turn to see what he means by a shape of consciousness. Importantly for our discussion of Hegel's historicism, it should be clear that Hegel does not take his model of consciousness to be a static one. This model is precisely that: a *model* or framework. The exact character of each of the three distinct moments varies, and in fact *has varied* over history. Each so-called shape of consciousness represents a particular instantiation of the general framework. One shape or pattern is distinguished from another by virtue of *its* particular set of the three interdependent concepts: self, object, representation. In the *Introduction*, Hegel writes:

Since what first appeared as the object sinks for consciousness to the level of its way of knowing it, and since the in-itself

1. G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), par. 85.

2. Ibid.

becomes a *being-for-consciousness* of the in-itself, the latter is now the new object. Herewith a new pattern [i.e. shape] of consciousness comes on the scene as well, for which the essence is something different from what it was at the preceding stage. It is this fact that guides the entire series of the patterns of consciousness in their necessary sequence.³

Here Hegel provides a sketch of the general motion by which one shape of consciousness undergoes a transformation of one of its three interdependent concepts (and as a necessary consequence, *all* three interdependent concepts) and henceforth becomes a new shape of consciousness.

We can see this model at work in the sections of the *Consciousness* chapter of the *Phenomenology*. The *Sense-certainty* section represents a particular shape of consciousness, its sorting out of its internal contradictions, and its eventual transcendence and resolution into the next shape of consciousness, represented by the *Perception* section. In *Sense-certainty* we encounter a concept of representation described as such: "The knowledge or knowing which is at the start or is immediately our object cannot be anything else but immediate knowledge itself, a knowledge of the immediate or of what simply *is*."⁴ This shape of consciousness also contains corresponding concepts of self and object: "Consciousness, for its part, is in this certainty only as a pure 'I'; or I am in it only as a pure 'This', and the object similarly only as a pure 'This'. I, *this* particular I, am certain of *this* particular thing."⁵ Here consciousness' concepts of both self and object are of an *immediate given*, of pure, unmediated, indexical demonstratives e.g. "This", "Here", "Now". Correspondingly, its concept of representation is one merely of apprehension, and not of comprehension.

From *Sense-certainty*, consciousness passes over into *Perception* and we can there identify new interdependent concepts of self, object, and representation. There Hegel writes: "This abstract universal medium, which can be called simply 'thinghood' or 'pure essence', is nothing else than what Here and Now have proved themselves to be, viz. a *simple togetherness* of a plurality."⁶ We now face a more refined concept of object than in *Sense-certainty*. The object is no longer a simple 'This' picked out

ostensively. It is now a complex plurality, capable of having properties. The concept of self has developed analogously. It is now aware of itself as a complex entity, which plays a part in the act of observation, and hence its concept of representation has followed suit. Thus, Hegel writes "since the object is the True and universal, the self-identical, while consciousness is alterable and unessential, it can happen that consciousness apprehends the object incorrectly and deceives itself. The percipient is aware of the possibility of deception."⁷

This discussion of Hegel's theory of the structure of consciousness generally, and its application to the two different shapes of consciousness represented in the *Sense-certainty* and *Perception* sections, elucidate how Hegel might argue for the historicist thesis that human cognition can and has fundamentally changed over the course of history. A change in any of the three interdependent concepts—self, object, or representation—and the necessary corresponding change in the two other concepts gives rise to a new shape of consciousness: a radically different relationship between knower, known, and knowing. Certainly such a transformation is to be regarded as a cognitive shift on par with the historicist thesis.

In the next section, I will explore Hegel's explication of the transition from the standpoint of *Sense-certainty* to that of *Perception* more closely, thereby revealing the three part motion each shape of consciousness undergoes in its passing over into the next. This will reveal a necessary corollary to the historicist thesis: each radical transformation of human cognition over time preserves and is informed by the preceding consciousnesses.

II

The *Introduction* tells us the aim of each stage of the investigation: "But the *goal* is as necessarily fixed for knowledge as the serial progression; it is the point where knowledge no longer needs to go beyond itself, where knowledge finds itself, where Notion corresponds to object and object to Notion."⁸ Thus in each shape of consciousness, consciousness attempts to locate truth in its concepts. It always has, as we will see, the same three places to look: the object, the self, and the immediate unity of object and self. We can observe how this works in *Sense-certainty*. As we have seen, the object of knowledge is "the immediate or what simply *is*."⁹ The objects

3. Ibid., par. 87.

4. Ibid., par. 90.

5. Ibid., par. 91.

6. Ibid., par. 113.

7. Ibid., par. 116.

8. Ibid., par. 80.

9. Ibid., par. 90.

of knowledge are demonstratives and indexicals: 'This', 'Here', 'Now'. In pursuit of the goal stated above, consciousness must attempt to locate truth in these objects of its knowledge. But how can it do that? In pointing out a 'Now', consciousness only identifies a 'Now' that *has been*. It has already been superseded by another 'Now', *not* the one it intended to grab hold of. 'Now' preserves itself, but not the one that was targeted: "This self-preserving Now is, therefore, not immediate but mediated; for it is determined as a permanent and self-preserving Now *through* the fact that something else, viz. Day and Night, is *not*."¹⁰ So the 'Now', the object of knowledge, has turned out to be knowable only as a universal, but what sense certainty takes as its object, as we have already noted, is supposedly an immediate demonstrative.

So, the search for truth in the object seems fruitless. Consciousness must turn to its second option: itself. "Its truth is in the object as *my* object, or in its being *Meinen*; it is, because *I* know it."¹¹ So here, in the self, consciousness seeks its truth in the immediacy of its own apprehension. The inability to grasp hold of its original object is overcome by *its own* holding of them. But it quickly encounters the same problem: "I, *this* 'I', see the tree and assert that 'Here' is a tree; but another 'I' sees the house and maintains that 'Here' is not a tree but a house instead."¹² The 'I' finds itself to be a universal in exactly the same way it found 'Here' and 'Now' to be universals. The search has only one third and final place to locate the truth in sense certainty. It must posit that "Its truth preserves itself as a relation that remains self-identical, and which makes no distinction of what is essential and what is unessential, between the 'I' and the object."¹³ Yet it should be no surprise that this too must fail since each attempt to locate the truth can grasp hold of something determinate only as a negation of other determinates: as a universal, and therefore not as the immediate given which sense certainty originally posited.

Sense-certainty, being at the end of its wits, has failed to locate truth. But it is not a merely negative result. It has succeeded in identifying a new truth: the universal. Consciousness has passed over into a new concept of objectivity. It will therefore also adopt a new concept of self and representation. Therefore, sense-certainty has passed over into a new

shape of consciousness, which Hegel calls perception, characterized as follows: "Perception...takes what is present to it as a universal. Just as universality is its principle in general, the immediately self-differentiating moments within perception are universal: 'I' is a universal and the object is a universal."¹⁴ And so, like sense certainty before it, perception will have the same three moments in which to locate its truth: object, self, and the immediate unity of the two. As we have already seen, perception confronts a complex object, capable of having properties. Its task then is to reconcile the *one* thing with its *many* properties: "On account of the *universality* of the property, I must rather take the objective essence to be on the whole a *community*...on account of the *determinateness* of the property, I must break up the continuity and posit the objective essence as a One that excludes."¹⁵

Here in its indecision, consciousness finds itself in the same situation as before in the *Sense-certainty* section when it confronted the 'Now' as a universal. So here is an obvious dilemma: If, having passed through the stages of sense certainty, consciousness passed over into perception only to find itself back in the exact spot it had been before with sense certainty, how is it to escape a perpetual back-and-forth between the two shapes?

To understand how consciousness is able to escape this dilemma, and to observe an instance of the above-mentioned secondary historicist thesis—namely that each radical transformation of human cognition over time preserves and is informed by the preceding consciousnesses—it is useful to turn to the *Introduction* yet again: "in every case the result of an untrue mode of knowledge must not be allowed to run away into an empty nothing, but must necessarily be grasped as the nothing *of that from which it results*—a result which contains what was true in the preceding knowledge."¹⁶ Consciousness is prevented from falling into a vicious circle by the fact that it has learned from the preceding shape of consciousness, so that it can apply its experience to drive itself forward. This reveals the importance of what I am calling the secondary historicist thesis. It is in fact a necessary corollary to the primary historicist thesis, since without the intervening enriching experience that one shape of consciousness is able to preserve as it passes over into a new shape of consciousness, the above dilemma would not be resolved and Hegel's account would fail

10. Ibid., par. 96.

11. Ibid., par. 100.

12. Ibid., par. 101.

13. Ibid., par. 104.

14. Ibid., par. 111.

15. Ibid., par. 117.

16. Ibid., par. 87.

before it began. Without preserving what it experiences in *Sense-certainty*, consciousness would not be able to proceed past its first moment of inquiry within *Perception*.

To see precisely how this plays out in the case of perception, Hegel writes:

Consciousness, therefore, necessarily runs through this cycle again, but this time not in the same way as it did the first time. For it has experienced in perception that the outcome and the truth of perception is its dissolution, or is reflection out of the True and into itself. Thus it becomes quite definite for consciousness how its perceiving is essentially constituted, viz. that it is not a simple pure apprehension, but *in its apprehension* is at the same time *reflected out of the True and into itself*.¹⁷

In other words, the experience of sense-certainty enlightened consciousness to the fact that it errs, and therefore made it aware of its own role in the object's passing into universality. The consciousness of *Perception* can proceed to the second moment of its inquiry (i.e. *self*, from the object, self, immediate unity progression) now that it acknowledges itself as the cause of the *seeming* universality of the object. It is precisely due to the fact that this shape of consciousness preserves and is informed by the preceding shape of consciousness that it is able to proceed. This process of preservation and adaptation—what I am calling the secondary historicist thesis—is a necessary and indispensable component of the radical cognitive change posited by the primary historicist thesis.

III

In this last section, I would like to briefly suggest that these historicist theses be interpreted alongside Hegel's theory of the sociality of meaning. In so doing, I will also argue that Hegel's theory of meaning contains a necessary limiting condition for the possibility of the validity of his historicist thesis as I have outlined it so far.

Since the construction, search for, and interpretation of meaning is the business of consciousness—what, in an important sense, consciousness seems to be *for*—it is reasonable to judge the feasibility of the notion that consciousness can undergo radical transformation alongside the idea of what is constitutive of meaning. I want to suggest that the way in which Hegel conceives of meaning is not itself tied to any fixed point

or perspective, but rather a theoretically *variable* linguistic community, and that this allows serious flexibility in the way we might conceive of consciousness organizing itself around the three interdependent concepts of self, object, and representation.

Hegel argues that concept possession and articulation depends on linguistic competence. This in turn, he argues, depends essentially on a linguistic community. So, any meaningful thought requires a community. More, for Hegel, having *any concepts at all* depends on being part of a community. Therefore, consciousness as we have been describing it is impossible in isolation, since consciousness is essentially the *possession of concepts* of self, object, and representation. Consciousness therefore essentially depends on a community.

The basic line of thought that I want to suggest is as follows: If we take consciousness to be intimately bound, on the deepest metaphysical level, with meaning and concept possession—which I think we should—then we should be willing to consider that the basic form, shape, or function of each co-varies with the basic form, shape, or function of the other. That is, consciousness varies with meaning and concept possession. Furthermore, if meaning and concept possession essentially depend on the existence of a linguistic community—which Hegel argues extensively that they do—then since linguistic communities vary drastically across time and space, it should be quite plausible that meanings and modes of concept possession can vary in a similar fashion. Unsurprising, then, the shapes of consciousness, which arise as a result of the possessed concepts (which, in turn, arise as the result of the existence of a particular linguistic community), similarly vary in their basic constitution, and can therefore change in the context of spatially or temporally different linguistic communities.

This, it seems, would be the *basic* requirement for the possible truth of the primary historicist thesis. It is still surely far from *sufficient* proof of the primary historicist thesis (that, if possible, would in all likelihood require a great deal of empirical evidence), but it nonetheless seems plausible that if this theoretical condition is satisfied, we should be willing to entertain the historicist thesis as represented in Hegel's system. Of course, this is valid only if we have reason to accept Hegel's theory of meaning, which is another matter. I merely find it important to point out the intimate connection.

17. Ibid., par. 118.

To recapitulate, I have argued first that Hegel posits a primary historicist thesis that human cognition has fundamentally changed in its basic concepts throughout history. I showed that this claim is fostered by Hegel's understanding of consciousness as comprising three basic concepts of self, object, and representation. I showed how Hegel takes these concepts to be variable, and observed how they vary from the *Sense-certainty* to *Perception* sections of the *Phenomenology*. I then considered closely the movement of consciousness between those two shapes of consciousness and concluded that the passing over from the first to the second was made possible only because the second shape was able to preserve the lessons learned from the first shape's failure. This I called the secondary historicist thesis, a necessary corollary to the primary thesis. In different terms, it posits that each radical transformation of human cognition over time preserves and is informed by the preceding consciousnesses. Finally, I offered a speculative connection between Hegel's theory of the sociality of meaning and these historicist theses. I suggest that taking concept possession to be essentially based on theoretically variable linguistic communities must be a *basic* criterion for accepting Hegel's historicist picture, and that this is at least a plausible thing to do.

Suspension from Reality and the Disenchantment of Humour and Irony: Comparing Kierkegaard's Ironist and Humorist in *The Concept of Irony* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*

William Bullock Jenkins

Dedicated to Dr. Brian Soderquist of the Kierkegaard Forskningscenteret- who memorably welcomed us to Copenhagen and was a beacon for my own move from an isolated irony.

I. Introduction

In *The Concept of Irony* Søren Aabye Kierkegaard characterised irony as 'absolute infinite negativity,' a Hegelian term with a twist. To Kierkegaard, irony is an existence apart from the world and functions as a 'suspension' and an 'isolation' from actuality. Pure, existential irony is thus 'infinite absolute negativity.' But what does this mean in relation to the actualisation and the realisation of one's self? Humour 'suspends' a person from the world in the same way as irony, but does not isolate him despite the persistent comic contradiction between finite and infinite existence. How then do these two concepts, humour and irony, relate to each other – how does an ironic being exist differently from a humorous being? How does Kierkegaard delineate this 'existential' irony in *The Concept of Irony with Constant Reference to Socrates* (1841) (CI) compared to humour in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846) (CUP)? Through these works we will examine Kierkegaard's definition and explanation of irony, its relation to humour, and how the two isolated existences may enter into 'actuality' and re-establish meaningful relations with other beings.

This paper will argue that the non-exclusive inwardness (*indelighed*)¹ of the humorist contrasts with the exclusive inwardness (*indesluttethed*)² of the ironist and serves as the cause of the differences between the ironic and humorous existences. The argument scrutinises the complex divergences between an ironic and a humorous existence through aspects of both positions such as: the comic contradictions of finitude, infinity, and the Absolute; the exclusivity of inwardness; the existence of sympathy and tragedy in humour; and the differing dialectic of the re-establishment

1. *Indelighed*: non-exclusive 'inwardness' of the humorist. *Indelig* is the corresponding adjective.

2. *Indesluttethed*: closed-off, exclusive 'inwardness' and 'isolation' of the ironist. The Danish term slut 'end, close' forms the basis of the key nuance between *Indesluttethed* and *Indelighed*. *Indesluttet* is the corresponding adjective.

of relationships and how the positions of irony and humour translate respectively into the actualisation of 'ethical' and 'religious' existences.

II. Stages of Life or Spheres of Existence

Irony and humour in Kierkegaard's work can only be understood through their relation to the three 'stages' or 'spheres of existence.' Climacus, narrator and humorist of *CUP*, writes: 'There are three existence-spheres: the aesthetic, the ethical, the religious. To these there correspond two boundaries:³ irony is the boundary between the aesthetic and the ethical; humour the boundary between the ethical and the religious.'⁴ These spheres represent ways of existing, different forms of inwardness and subjectivity. These stages do indicate a natural developmental process from one stage onwards; however, the process from each stage to the next is neither assured in its order nor uniform between individuals. The individual seeks their *ejendommelighed*⁵ or 'individuality.' The three stages of the aesthetic, ethical, and religious are existences that are engaged with 'actuality,' or *virkelighed*,⁶ which represents the set of relationships and ties to the world and other individuals one maintains; it is a set of values.⁷

The aesthetic, ethical, and religious existences that are engaged with *virkelighed* have different modes of engagement that are not distinct to the three stages, but form a continuum of different existences even within one given 'sphere.' For instance, Kierkegaard suggests that the aesthete ranges from an 'immediate' aesthete to a 'reflective' aesthete. The defining characteristic of an aesthete is his relation to 'immediacy,' which Evans terms 'the natural, spontaneous sensations at the heart of conscious

3. *Confinium*, in the original Danish (from the Latin), is used interchangeably with 'boundary' in this paper.

4. Søren Aabye Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. Alastair Hannay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 420-421.

5. *Ejendommelighed* from *Ejendomme* (property), *Ejendommelig* (being your own property) suggests the individual's peculiarity and unique individuality; hence *Ejendommelighed* or 'the state of being one's own property' is 'individuality' or 'individualness.'

6. *Virkelighed* from *Virke* (work) when combined with *-lighed* becomes 'reality' or 'actuality' and is defined by the relationships that tie it to the world expressed in the term *verdensforholdende*.

7. *Virkelighed*, 'actuality,' is further qualified by Kierkegaard as '*Verdensforholdende*,' 'situations of the world,' or 'relationships in the world.' K. Brian Soderquist, *The Isolated Self: Irony as Truth and Untruth in Søren Kierkegaard's On the Concept of Irony* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2007), 100. For a fuller discussion of actuality, see *ibid.*, 100-106.

human existence.'⁸ The 'immediate' aesthete delights in the instant amoral gratifications of life, while the life of the increasingly reflective aesthete '[culminates] in the melancholy, boredom and despair..., the world as it appears to the aesthetic mode of existence becomes drained of significance.'⁹

Irony thus becomes 'the boundary between the aesthetic and the ethical,' and the meaninglessness of actuality in the eyes of the ironist is only remedied by the re-attachment of meaning to actuality and its relationships, this time self-defined in an 'ethical' stance. According to Westphal, '[i]t is precisely the normative, revelatory significance of conscience (though not its infallibility) that defines the ethical.' In other words, it is not the choice of good that makes one an ethicist, but the choice to define oneself by good and evil.¹⁰ The ethicist aims to become a cohesive self in two ways: first, by becoming more than a collection of contending desires at a given point in time (the finite); and second, by recognizing that this unified identity is one that endures over time (the infinite). For Kierkegaard, to be a self is to know who one is – the commitments and values that one lives for and that permeate all that one does and is.¹¹ A self reconciles the contradictions between the finite and the infinite. Religious existence, beyond the *confinium* of humour from the ethical, is a mix of the ethical and the aesthetic, but resolves the personal insecurity caused by the comic contradictions of life (realised in irony and humour) by a belief in the absurd and by establishing an absolute relation to the Absolute which, in Kierkegaard's view, is God.

Thus, the individual that exists aesthetically, ethically, or religiously is engaged with 'actuality' and often 'immediacy' in his or her own way, by the definitions he or she chooses. However, the 'immediate,' aesthetic individual still lives within the 'immediate,' inherited sets of relationships that are prescribed by his society and culture, rather than values that derive from a reflective self-evaluation. The later 'reflective' aesthete begins to realise this. He discovers a lack of significance in 'immediacy' – the relationships and values set by society and not the self – which he lives

8. Stephen C. Evans, *Kierkegaard: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 70.

9. Alastair Hannay, "Connections and Confrontations," in *Kierkegaard and Philosophy: Selected Essays*, ed. Alastair Hannay (London: Routledge, 2003), 165.

10. Merold Westphal, *Becoming a Self: A Reading of Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1992), 23-24.

11. Evans, *Kierkegaard: An Introduction*, 91.

by, and may seek consolation from the emptiness and lack of significance in existence in 'romantic melancholy.'¹² The loss of significance and the 'despair'¹³ that accompanies the transition to the 'standpoint,' or *standpunkt*, of the ironist are the first realisation of the discrepancy between the infinite imagination of the individual and the limited possibilities of actuality – the comic contradiction between the finite and the infinite, which is the peculiar insight of an ironic and humorous existence.

III. Irony

Kierkegaard composed his first thoughts on irony in his doctoral thesis published in 1841 entitled *The Concept of Irony with Constant Reference to Socrates (CI)*. In this work, particularly in the section 'For Orientation,' Kierkegaard proposes various types of irony, from simple rhetorical irony to relative irony. But irony is more than a type of backwards communication to Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms – it possesses many forms but is epitomised in 'pure irony,' an existential standpoint that defines a being and its actuality. In *CI*, Kierkegaard treats irony in detail, describing rhetorical irony, or the simple irony of speech, by writing '[i]n oratorical discourse there frequently occurs a figure of speech which bears the name irony and whose characteristic is this: to say the opposite of what is meant.'¹⁴ This strikes upon the core characteristic of all types of irony: the discrepancy between the phenomenon of an act and its essence or meaning. With regard to rhetorical irony Kierkegaard writes, '[w]hen I speak the thought or meaning is the essence, the word the phenomenon.'¹⁵ The existential ironic life is thus the discrepancy between one's outward actions, the 'phenomenon,' often in sync with actuality and the immediate relationships prescribed by society, and the true inward, subjective thoughts of a person, the 'essence.' We may say 'the weather is nice today' when in fact it is a dreary, dull day. Thus, an ironist will say what he doesn't mean and do what he doesn't intend.

If the relationships of actuality are maintained while the individual no longer attributes value to them, the individual exists in pure irony in which the phenomenon does not accord with the essence of the person. In this way irony can be the incognito of the ethical, i.e. a person can appear to

live an ethically-defined life while seeing the ironic contradictions. The individual senses progressively that the values and purposes present that define his environment and society, 'actuality,' have no inward validity and are outwardly imposed. This creates anomie in the individual. Thus a consciousness of his own subjectivity emerges and he adopts a stance of *indeshluttethed*, or closed-off inwardness and isolation. The individual can exit or be 'suspended' from actuality by disconnecting from the set of relationships within himself.

Pure irony is an inward, 'isolated' existence: it does not communicate its essence or intent to others, even other ironists, or in doing so it ceases to have the inconsistency between its essence and its phenomenon, and is therefore no longer inward irony. After realising immediacy's lack of significance the ironist is isolated and becomes *indeshluttet*, or closed-off and inward, taking only the counsel of his own essence and apprehending the contradiction between his infinite 'essence' and his finite relationships. The ability to perceive this comic contradiction is a shared characteristic of irony and humour and, according to Hannay, what 'typifies irony is the abstract measure through which it levels everything.'¹⁶ Irony 'levels' all relationships due to the ironic loss of their significance in actuality.¹⁷ The ironist's understanding of this meaninglessness is held inwardly and cannot be effectively communicated. Thus the ironist becomes increasingly *indeshluttet* as he comprehends the full extent of his isolation.

Thus, irony can be considered an 'objective' *standpunkt* due to its abstraction and objectification of the self – the ability of the ironist to refer to himself in the 'third person.' On the other hand the transition to an ethical, humorous, and religious existence is a move to a 'subjective' existence. At its base the move to an ironic *standpunkt* is the loss of both an immediate understanding of the self and definition by external social standards; it is the loss of being simultaneously at home and alienated from society, an *unheimliche* in Heideggerian terms.

The isolation, self-reflection, and inwardness of pure irony becomes the 'awakening of subjectivity.' It is a path to the realisation of *ejendommelighed* and self-definition. In *The Isolated Self*, Soderquist recalls Kierkegaard's 'double movement' of irony. He suggests that

16. Hannay, "Connections and Confrontations," 164.

17. *Niveller*: verb, to 'level' as a part of the ironist's loss of significant relationship with actuality.

12. *Tungsindhed*: the 'romantic melancholy' of the reflective aesthete.

13. *Fortvivlelse*: the 'despair' that pervades the ironist's existence.

14. Søren Aabye Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony with Constant Reference to Socrates*, trans. Lee M. Capel (London: Collins, 1966), 264.

15. *Ibid.*

'[t]he first part of this movement arises as the individual discovers his or her own freedom from immediacy and becomes aware of the self as a subject,' and that irony is 'a consciousness that cultivates isolation from the world of inherited values, an isolation which, in the first instance, Kierkegaard considers to be necessary for the development of the self.'¹⁸ The second movement is then to build up relationships that are meaningful because of the decision to infuse them with personal meaning, whether for aesthetic, ethical or religious reasons.¹⁹ Alastair Hannay presents an interpretation of the aftermath of the movement into irony as a 'leveling' that results in a nihilism which presents an unlimited freedom to choose your own moral point of view and thus precipitates a move into 'ethical' existence.²⁰

What, then, are the characteristics of an ironist and his ironic existence? Irony is the objectification and more importantly the 'suspension' from the relativities of actuality and immediacy. For the ironist, as Climacus states, 'it thus becomes important for him to suspend what is constitutive in actuality.'²¹ Kierkegaard describes the suspension from immediate relations as 'dying to oneself.' The defining feature of irony in contrast to humour is that it does not see the comic contradiction of the finite and the infinite *within* itself because the ironic individual does not have a 'self' *per se*, that is, a set of values by which one lives. Irony then occurs when the ironist does not 'let himself be caught in any relativity...' (i.e. not becoming engaged in meaningful, immediate relations in the finite world of actuality), but has 'made the move of infinity' to an abstract stance. This abstraction of the self echoes 'his inability to grasp himself ironically; for it is also within his capacity to speak of himself as a third person, to place himself as a vanishing particular together with the absolute requirement – indeed to *put them together*.'²²

Thus, irony is not applied to this or that social value but is rather all-encompassing. Kierkegaard conceives a 'relative' ironist, someone who sees the contradictions in certain relationships or social relativities, such as how a person from a particular social group like a business elite may regard the values or lifestyle of a rural agricultural community. Climacus speculates in *CUP* that '[t]he irony arises from continually placing the particularities of the finite together with the infinite ethical requirement

18. Soderquist, *The Isolated Self*, 2.

19. Ibid., 173.

20. Hannay, "Connections and Confrontations," 164.

21. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 283.

22. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 421.

and letting the contradictions come about.'²³ The contradictions arising from relative peculiarities alone are not pure irony; true irony is in the contradictions arising from the universal set of peculiarities. Kierkegaard writes '[i]rony *sensu eminentiori* is not aimed at one part of existence or another, but is aimed at the entire actuality of a given time and under given circumstances...it is by virtue of its totalizing view that it destroys individual parts...irony [is] as infinite absolute negativity.'²⁴

IV. Irony as 'Infinite Absolute Negativity'

Kierkegaard uses the term 'infinite absolute negativity' (borrowed from Hegel) to describe irony.²⁵ What does this mean for the ironist? It means negative freedom, that is, freedom from. As described above, when the ironist 'suspends' himself from actuality and immediacy he achieves a nihilistic, value-less existence which retains no meaningful relationships in the world. It is a complete secession from the world and the rejection of ethical or other responsibilities, and thus is negative freedom.

How does the ironist achieve this negative freedom and how does it differ from positive freedom? Kierkegaard writes '[i]f I am conscious when I speak that what I say is my meaning, and that what is said is an adequate expression for my meaning...I am here positively free.'²⁶ Thus, the direct, sincere communication of meaning provides positive freedom, that is, the freedom to act in a certain way in accordance with rights and one's remarks. Andrew Cross states that '[w]hen we speak in a direct, non-ironic mode, we both express and make commitments of various kinds. To make an assertion is, arguably, to pledge ourselves to the truth of what we assert; to stake, as it were, our reputation for reliability and sincerity on what we say.'²⁷ The critical trait of positive freedom is that 'I am bound by what is said.'²⁸

However, when we speak ironically it is dissimulation. As Kierkegaard

23. Ibid.

24. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 264.

25. Reed Merrill, " 'Infinite Absolute Negativity': Irony in Socrates, Kierkegaard and Kafka," *Comparative Literature Studies* 16, no. 3 (1979): 222, accessed July 28, 2010, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40245760>. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 271.

26. Ibid., 264.

27. Andrew Cross, "Neither either nor or: The perils of reflexive irony," in *Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 130.

28. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 264.

writes in *CI*, if 'what I said is not my meaning or the opposite of my meaning, then I am free in relation to others and myself.'²⁹ This is 'radical verbal irony,' the rhetorical or verbal result of an ironist's existence, which frees the ironist from the responsibilities of actuality. Socrates is the archetype of the existential ironist in the *Concept of Irony* and Kierkegaard states that in his relation to the established order of things, '[Socrates] was entirely negative...he is suspended above all the qualifications of substantial life,' and thus was the first negatively free subject.³⁰ Thus Socrates as an existential ironist is disengaged from the social world because he cannot be held accountable for what he says, the phenomenon, because it does not accord with his intended meaning (if any), his essence.

However, the problem still exists that the ironist must still arbitrarily except himself from his own derogating attitude which precludes irony from being truly 'infinite.' Reflexive irony, as Cross terms it, is not realisable. Finitude, therefore, is the problem of irony; just as it perceives the contradiction of the finite and the infinite in actuality it has no way of reconciling the two. Cross muses that '[i]f this is correct, then so long as irony is seen as (to use the formula Kierkegaard appropriated from Hegel) "infinite absolute negativity" – as a purely and unconditionally negative orientation toward all human existence – it is inherently unstable.'³¹ And thus, the ironist can become mired in meaningless 'despair,' but he cannot actualise his own personality and character with a reconciliation of the finite and the infinite without exiting irony and stepping into character.³²

V. Humour as a Concept in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*

Like irony, humour is an existence which perceives the comic contradictions of existence. While irony perceives the contradiction between the finite and the infinite, humour perceives the contradiction between the finite, rational world and the absurd, unfounded belief in the absolute. As Westphal writes, 'the ethical and religious persons recognize the discrepancy between themselves (individually and collectively) and the infinite and absolute, on the one hand, and God, on the other. This is the "contradiction" that enables them to see human existence as comic and to appear incognito in a publicly visible irony or humour.'³³ Thus

humour's contradiction is the 'absolute paradox' which is resolved in the religious life. The ethical existence's incognito is irony which is resolved by a reconciliation of the transitory relationships of the finite world with the ethical infinity of values.

Humour is not treated in the *Concept of Irony* in depth but intermittent allusions are made to it, which are particularly notable in the final remarks of Kierkegaard's thesis. However Soderquist in Chapter 6 of *The Isolated Self* notes that in Kierkegaard's journals from the time of his writing of *CI* there are constant references made to humour, and particularly its relation to irony, and the 'see-saw' of the two.³⁴

Humour is related to pain which instills it with a paradoxical quality. But how can this be so? Between pages 431 and 434, the narrator of *CUP*, Climacus, provides an extensive footnote of examples of humorous situations that cause pain. For instance, Climacus notes that when an individual in ordinary conversation poses a rhetorical question and doesn't expect an answer but his interlocutor quickly interjects, causing pain and humiliation to the interjector, this is a comical situation.³⁵ In the same way, caricature is humorous because of the contradiction between likeness and unlikeness. Climacus also provides the example of the preacher who, confused by the false cognate between German *Fleisch* (flesh) and Danish *Flæsk* (pork), solemnly mounts the pulpit and announces in line with the first chapter of John's gospel [John 1:14] that 'Word has become pork.'³⁶ Undoubtedly for the clergyman this situation may be painful at the time, but this supports Climacus' argument that in order to experience a contradiction as painless and comic, the individual needs a 'way out', by inhabiting a 'higher standpoint,' and thus irony and humour are 'suspended.'³⁷ Kierkegaard suggests via Climacus that a key characteristic of the religious existence is suffering, and thus we can see how humour functions as the characteristic of the borderline religious person or the incognito of the religious: by alleviating the pain of contradiction.

However, another clear way to distinguish humour from irony and the other spheres of existence is to see their location with regard to the given existence. As Climacus writes, '[i]mmmediacy has the comic outside itself;

34. Soderquist, *The Isolated Self*, 189-192.

35. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 433.

36. Ibid., 433-434n.

37. Ibid., 435.

29. Ibid., 247-248.

30. Ibid., 217.

31. Cross, "Neither either nor or," 130.

32. *træder i karakter*: 'Stepping into character' or reclaiming *ejendommelighed* and self-definition in relation to actuality.

33. Westphal, *Becoming a Self*, 23-24.

irony has it *within itself*...[h]umour has the comic *within itself*.³⁸ The difference, as Climacus notes, is that while the perception of the comic is within the ironist, he perceives it only *without* himself because of his abstraction from the world of contradiction. Further, because the ironist is *indeskuttet*, i.e. he is 'closed off in inwardness,' his own self cannot be reached by contradiction because it is not juxtaposed to actuality. While Kierkegaard characterises the ironist as *indeskuttet*, he describes the humorist as *indelig* or 'inward.' The nuance between these two words in Danish lies in the *slut* ('end,' or 'close') of *indeskuttethed*, in contrast to the non-exclusive inwardness, *indeligthed*, of the humorist. This returns us to the crucial difference between humour and irony – the prey of the comic contradiction lies within and without of the humorist.

Further, while the problem of irony is finitude, the problem of humour is tragedy. Tragedy consists in the pain emanating from the incongruity between the ideals and hopes of a human being, the 'infinite,' and the actuality of our lives, the 'finite.' Climacus notes that '*the tragic is the suffering contradiction, the comic the painless contradiction*.'³⁹ Humour provides the 'way out' of this pain by its sympathy and its intellectual recognition of the veracity of a religious life. According to Kierkegaard, the religious life is a life of suffering which must necessarily induce tragedy or humour. Thus the relation of humour to the religious existence is brought about by their common pain and tragedy.

Climacus further demonstrates that humour, unlike irony, is 'sympathetic,' largely because of its self-deprecation. As Kierkegaard writes 'because there is always a hidden pain in humour there is also sympathy. In irony there is no sympathy; it is self-assertion and its sympathy is therefore sympathetic in an entirely indirect way, not with anyone in particular, but with the idea of self-assertion as every human being's possibility.'⁴⁰ On the other hand, because humour perceives the comic contradictions within itself it can experience 'sympathy' or a certain solidarity with other beings, a pre-requisite of the Kierkegaardian 'religious' existence.

Although the passions must be engaged to facilitate the movement to an ethical life, the ironist finds the demands of an ethical life intellectually appealing. To Kierkegaard the magnetism of the ethical sphere to the ironist

precipitates a movement in the same way that the humorist's movement to belief in the absurd—that is, in the paradoxical Absolute, God—is the only way for him to ultimately heal and reconcile the pain-induced comic contradictions.

VI. Re-entrance into Actuality from Irony and Humour

The re-actualisation of the self is the eventual outcome of the ironist and the humorist's existence. But the infusion of a subjective meaning into relationships is the only way to overcome the 'isolation' and the inwardness of irony and humour. How does Kierkegaard suggest that this transition can occur?

Both the ironist and the humorist can intellectually understand the demands of an ethical and a religious existence respectively, but cannot enter them by force of mere intellectual prowess. The transition requires a deeply personal attachment to the values inherent in each existence in order for it to be realised. In the ironist the problem of finitude is embodied in the comic contradiction between the infinite and the finite. The actualisation of an ethical life facing the ironist is to reconcile the finite—everyday relationships, his *virkelighed*—with an ethical meaning which inhabits the infinite, thereby apparently resolving the contradiction.

For the ironist, the task is to 'take ownership of the actual relationships that are the essential elements of the self.'⁴¹ Irony is the realisation of meaninglessness and ignorance – the lack of inherent significance in actuality. It realises that the proposition of a positive system, maybe like Hegel's, is meaningless.

Kierkegaard proposes a technique by which the ironist can re-actualise in repetition: 'What is "repeated," restored, is a world infused with objects of sustaining value, an enigmatic, value-saturated world whose power, allure, and potential for support far exceeds whatever muffled thoughts or passing theory might arise about the ground or source of that world bequeathed.'⁴² Thus, as irony becomes 'infinite absolute negativity' it exposes the vacuum of significance in actuality, but it also opens the door for the ironist to 'step into character' and realise their own *ejendommelighed*. Thus, irony once

38. Ibid., 436.

39. Ibid., 431.

40. Ibid., 436.

41. Soderquist, *The Isolated Self*, 110.

42. Edward F. Mooney, *On Søren Kierkegaard: Dialogue, Polemics, Lost Intimacy, and Time* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2007), 302.

again becomes attached to what it mocks in the ethical sphere: the finite world.

Humour, as the incognito of the religious, actualises in a religious existence. The humorist must look to resolve the painfulness of comic contradiction by establishing a meaningful relationship. This relationship is not with actual human relationships as for the ironist, but instead with the infinite demands of an absolute relationship to God. The contradiction between the finite and the infinite in the ironic sphere is contrasted with the Absolute. This creates the comic contradiction apparent to the humorist. Kierkegaard writes that '[t]he humorist constantly...sets the God-idea into conjunction with other things and evokes the contradiction...but he does not himself stand related to God. The religious man does the same, he sets the God idea [sic] into juxtaposition with everything and sees the contradiction, but in his inmost consciousness he is related to God.'⁴³ The transition from the *standpunkt* of humour into a religious existence lies in placing your belief in the absurd. For according to Louis Mackey, 'God is the infinite nothingness that appears in the failure of the finite... Whenever all human possibilities – aesthetic, intellectual, moral – are exhausted, there is God present.'⁴⁴ But how can a being existing in the finite world relate itself to 'infinite nothingness' and still retain a subjectivity? It is only through belief in the absurd that such a contradiction can be disregarded but not resolved. Therefore, it is faith against all rationality and experience (i.e. belief in the absurd) that is the conclusion of the humorist's search – and thus Kierkegaard terms the result a 'religious' existence.

VII. Conclusion: Juxtaposing Irony and Humour

It is clear that irony and humour are alike in their relation to an ethical and a religious existence. The ironist and the humorist possess the same insights as the corresponding ethical and religious persons and they 'lack only the personal appropriation of the ethical and religious tasks implicit in these insights.'⁴⁵ In the course of this paper we demonstrated that the key distinction between the isolated and exclusive inwardness (*indelsluttethed*) of the ironist and the non-exclusive, sympathetic *standpunkt* of the humorist (*indelighed*) is the root of these differences despite both being

objectified and 'suspended' from actuality. We explored this difference through various traits of both irony and humour including: the comic contradictions of finitude, infinity, and the Absolute; absolute infinite negativity; the exclusivity of inwardness and subjectivity; the essence of sympathy and tragedy in humour; and the differing movements to and from the positions of irony and humour with their translation into the respective actualisation of 'ethical' and 'religious' existences.

First, both the ironist and the humorist perceive comic contradictions but differ in their resolution in relation to actuality. Irony understands the contradiction between the finite and the infinite, humour the absurdism of having an existence in finite actuality while establishing an absolute relation to the infinite absolute. Irony and humour contrast in their relation to the infinite. Irony is 'absolute infinite negativity,' pure infinity and the absence of relation to and isolation from finite actuality. Humour, on the other hand, is a relation to the infinite absurdity of God and the creation of an infinite absolute subject faith that still maintains a relation to finite actual relationships in its religious guise. Irony is self-assertion and, in its movement to the 'ethical,' presents the first chance in Kierkegaard's view to define our 'self' or *ejendommelighed*. In contrast the humorist 'rejects any prideful assertion of his or her superiority to others.'⁴⁶ Irony is the beginning of a subjective life that is completed by the religious humorist. Irony is the realisation of the ability to define and derive our relationships from subjective experience – it is 'engaging one's own subjectivity from within...'⁴⁷

Kierkegaard and his various guises wrote critically of inherited social and cultural values and norms. To Kierkegaard, these norms create a situation of 'immediacy' where the individual robotically and uncritically obeys these inherited beliefs of his society and culture. Irony, while on the border of entering an ethical sphere, also teeters on the edge of nihilism; in the same way, humour, as the *confinium* of a religious existence, is just as close to cynicism.⁴⁸

Irony and humour provide a possible path by which the individual can explore his or her potential and achieve an existence free of social inhibition. They make possible an existence where the individual and his

43. Søren Aabye Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 451, quoted in Merrill.

44. Louis Mackey, "The Poetry of Inwardness," in *Kierkegaard: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Josiah Thompson (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1972).

45. Westphal, *Becoming a Self*, 168.

46. Evans, *Kierkegaard: An Introduction*, 135.

47. Merrill, "Infinite Absolute Negativity," 229.

48. Westphal, *Becoming a Self*, 168.

personality reconcile the comic contradictions between finite, everyday relationships and the infinite side of human hope and faith within himself. But as Kierkegaard wrote in his journals, full of sincerity and without resort to a pseudonymous guise: 'It is only after a man has thus understood himself inwardly, and has thus seen his way, that life acquires peace and significance; only then is he rid of that tiresome, ill-omened fellow-traveller, the irony of life.'⁴⁹ We cannot define ourselves by ironic 'absolute infinite negativity' and isolate ourselves from the finite world. It is only by understanding the irony and humour of an actuality stuck between finite necessities and infinite wishes that we can realise our own individuality, our *ejendommelighed*, amid all the contradictions of existence.

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49. Merrill, "Infinite Absolute Negativity," 229.

The Logical Problem with Environmental Existentialism, and an Existential Approach to Environmentalist Action

Shea Cheatham

1. Introduction

Since the conception of the environmentalist movement in the 1950's and its rise in the 1970's, many attempts have been made to integrate several branches of philosophy with environmentalism. Seeing as how ethical, social and political issues surrounding the rise of technology and destruction of nature were integral to the purpose and goal of environmentalism as an applied philosophy, environmentalism naturally assimilated components of ethical, social and political philosophy into its own. Soon a movement attempting to integrate existential and environmental philosophies gained momentum, resulting in an exploration of environmental existentialism and eco-phenomenology.

In this essay, I will explain why an existential approach to environmentalism is logically impossible, and that the reason for the impossibility of this approach lies within essential components of each philosophy that conflict with one another. This is not an argument against environmentalism or existentialism as independent philosophies; it is an argument against applying a superficial existential layer to environmentalism with the intention of making the consequences of environmental degradation more immediate and accessible to the individual. Importantly, however, I will also argue that despite the logical conflict that arises when attempting to integrate the two philosophies, it is in our best interest to take environmentalist action as existential beings.

In the next section, I will define existentialism and environmentalism, and examine both the focus of each philosophy as well as the philosophical method by which each approaches its respective topic of interest. In the third section, I will explain why there is a logical inconsistency with an existential approach to environmentalism by highlighting the contrast between the manner in which each philosophy approaches the epistemological problem regarding whether or not our perception of external objects and events accurately represents their intrinsic nature. Importantly, environmentalism holds that the external world has an objective existence, and that this objective existence gives it value apart from what we give to it.

Finally, in the fourth section I will discuss how, despite the conflict between the two philosophies, we cannot deny that our experiences of nature's degradation causes us to suffer existentially, regardless of whether or not that experience is objectively accurate. Therefore, it is in our best interest as inherently existential beings to take environmentalist action while circumventing the logical issue that arises in accepting environmentalist philosophy from an existential perspective. We must take environmentalist action in order to prevent the existential suffering that we experience from failing to act, rather than attempt to utilize environmentalism as a philosophy and justify action on environmentalist grounds.

2. Defining Existentialism and Environmentalism, and Why We Are To Be Considered Existential Beings

In order to define environmentalism and environmental philosophy, we can begin by closely examining the roots of the word 'environment'. 'Environment', when broken down, means that which 'environs' us, or encircles and surrounds us. This definition is important in developing a broad understanding of environmentalism; it is, in the barest sense, the philosophy concerning the world in which we have been thrown. However, we are able to gain a much deeper understanding of environmentalism as a philosophy by examining the issues that it addresses.

Environmentalism predominantly concerns itself with exploring the intrinsic value of nature, the moral status of plants and non-human animals, the restoration and conservation of nature, and the ethics behind decisions humans make that affect the external world. It is characterized by its associate social movement, which focuses on solving contemporary issues regarding human beings' exploitation of the earth. Issues examined in environmental philosophy directly correspond with those brought to light through environmental activism: overfishing, deforestation, global warming, rising extinction rates and the like are all major issues explored in environmental philosophy and subsequently addressed in environmental activism.

Existentialism is significantly more abstract. The term 'existentialism' was first adopted by Jean-Paul Sartre, and came to be identified with the cultural movement he was associated with in the 1940s and 1950s.¹ The existential movement was just as much a literary movement as a philosophical one,

1. Steven Crowell, "Existentialism," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last modified October 10, 2010, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/existentialism/>.

with authors such as Sartre, Albert Camus, Friedrich Nietzsche, and José Ortega identified as existentialists.² There is, however, a vitally important underlying theme that all existential philosophers have explored: the deep and complex matter of how individuals experience both themselves and all that exists externally.

Given the abstract nature of existentialism as a complete philosophy, for the purposes of this essay I will focus specifically on Heideggerian existentialism. Martin Heidegger is not considered a traditionally existential philosopher, because his philosophy is not centrally focused on man.³ Rather, Heidegger's central concern is the relationship between man and Being, and the nature of man as "Being-in-the-world."⁴ He reasons that in order to gain understanding regarding the relationship between man and the world, more is required than accumulated biological evidence and information. For Heidegger, no amount of natural science will ever truly capture the depth and meaning of the manner in which human individuals exist within the world. Pressing existential questions inquire as to how we experience all that exists outside of ourselves, whether our perception can possibly accurately reflect the intrinsic nature of the external world, and whether anything external exists at all.

We are existential beings because we have inherent epistemological deficiencies in our understanding and experience of everything external; these deficiencies characterize the existential perspective. Our perspective is existential because these epistemological deficiencies necessarily define existentialism, and we can, and more importantly, *do* proceed from this position of epistemological uncertainty to act and to attempt to grasp at the true nature of everything external regardless. As Jaspers explains,

Truth is infinitely *more* than scientific correctness... Does not the sum of all objects form the totality of Being? No. As the horizon encompasses all things in a landscape, so all objects are encompassed by that in which they are. As we move towards the horizon in the world of spaces without ever reaching it, because the horizon moves with us and re-establishes itself ever anew as the Encompassing at each moment, so objective research moves toward totalities at each moment which never become a

2. Ibid.

3. Martin Heidegger, "The Questions Concerning Technology," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1977), xiv.

4. Michael Wheeler, "Martin Heidegger," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last modified March 21, 2013, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heidegger>.

total and real Being, but must be passed through towards new vistas. Only if all horizons met in one closed whole, so that they formed a finite multiplicity, could we attain, by moving through all the horizons, the one closed Being. Being, however, is not closed for us and the horizons are not finite. On all sides we are impelled towards the Infinite.⁵

Jaspers argues that all human attempts to understand the true nature of reality are limited. This is directly caused by our epistemological deficiencies, and we are made to continually transform our understanding in our attempt to grasp at some small fragment of truth. However, our inability to understand truth in an objective light does not prevent us from striving for understanding, and acting in ways that seem to affect the world around us; to the contrary, we strive even more fervently to attain understanding despite our inability to do so, and intently act despite our ignorance of the objective consequences. We are existential beings by default; it is inherent to both our limited and subjective understanding and also to our continual action and efforts, despite this reality.

Looking at these two definitions, as well as the defense of our existence as one rooted in existentialism, one can see the inconsistency that arises in applying an existential perspective to environmental philosophy to create 'environmental existentialism.' The scope of questions asked and answered in environmentalism does not seamlessly begin where existentialism ends; it does not pick up where existentialism leaves off, nor does it easily allow for approaching environmentalist issues through the existentialists lens. Rather, environmentalism bypasses the heart of existentialism entirely, ignoring the fundamental chasm that lies between the two philosophies (the chasm concerning the possibility of perceived objectivity through a subjective experience).

3. The Logical Problem With an Existential Approach to Environmentalism

The premises on which environmentalism stands conflict with the core of existential philosophy. Existentialism is founded on the acceptance of our inability to be absolutely certain of the true nature of the external world; according to existentialism, we cannot even be sure if anything external exists at all. If environmentalism is to accept this epistemological

5. Karl Jaspers, "Jaspers: Existenzphilosophie," in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, ed. Walter Arnold Kaufmann (New York: Meridian Books, 1956).

uncertainty, all environmentalist action would ultimately be unjustifiable. How could one justify acting for the purpose of creating positive change in that which one has previously accepted does not necessarily have objective or independent existence?

Given these accepted definitions of existentialism and environmentalism, a logical issue becomes apparent when trying to approach environmentalism from an existential perspective. Environmentalism clearly focuses on external issues and possible solutions, paying no attention to the grounds on which existential philosophy stands. Environmentalism begins by addressing perceived external problems assuming that the world has objective existence and carries inherent value or worth apart from meaning that humans and society have designated. Furthermore, in order to justify deriving environmentalist action from environmentalist philosophy, it must be assumed that we are capable of understanding or knowing the intrinsic nature of the world to sufficiently warrant action from environmental activists. It is doubtful that environmental activists would take action if they were not convinced that their actions would preserve or restore the inherent value of the natural world.

The attempt to apply an existential film to environmentalism is no more than a novel way to bring the primary environmentalist problem, the degradation of the natural world, into a more immediate and personal light to those who are not acting in accordance with the aims of environmentalism. It is an attempt to abolish excuses individuals make that are based in the way society functions in order to place value on the actions of each individual. Environmental existentialism argues against common excuses given for inaction; for example, environmental existentialism presents an argument against the "drop in the bucket" excuse, where responsibility is shirked through the belief that an individual is incapable of creating environmental change, the "innocence" excuse, which blames prior generations for the current state of the environment, and the social conformity excuse.⁶ Defenses for environmental existentialism all refer to the same issue within the environmentalist movement. "The environmental movement has a problem: from a conceptual or philosophical point of view, it's pretty boring," begins one journal-published article that argues for an existential approach to environmentalism.⁷ Nowhere is due attention given to the issue that arises when applying existentialism to environmentalism.

6. Josey Schwartz, "Existentialist Environmentalism," *Wordpress*, last modified January 2, 2012, <http://jozschwartz.wordpress.com/2012/01/02/existentialist-environmentalism/>.

7. Jay Ogilvy, "Existentialism and the Environment," *World Futures: The Journal*

In order to carry the conviction that their actions are the right ones, environmentalists must believe that within their understanding of the external world lie some fragments of absolute truth regarding its inherent nature. This conflicts with existentialism because it bypasses the most fundamental question examined in existential philosophy. An existential perspective cannot be used by environmentalism in order to convince those who are uninterested or apathetic to take action by centering on the negative existential effect the individual experiences as a result of the destruction of the environment without bridging the essential gap between the two philosophies. Environmental existentialism (or existential environmentalism) fails to address the primary and most important question posed in existential philosophy; at best, it briefly answers that question with an unconcerned affirmation: of course our perception is at the very least correct enough to sanctify action intended to better the world as it exists in and of itself. This philosophy then quickly moves on to topics of more traditional environmentalist concern with a superficially appealing but groundless existential twist.

4. The Existential Problems And Suffering We Experience By Not Taking Environmentalist Action

However, we should not forgo environmentalist action in favor of apathy or nihilism, due to our uncertainty regarding the existence of an external world and the validity of our perception of it. There are many ways in which our experience of the destruction of the natural world causes us a great amount of personal suffering. Heidegger's *The Question Concerning Technology* and other essays illuminate why this is the case.

For example, as a society we have altered our perception of the earth from that which surrounds us to that which must be "set upon", and something to be challenged.⁸ This new perspective of the earth as something to be used and exploited challenges its natural role in our experience, and we, as individuals, are ultimately harmed by this shift in perspective and subsequent action. Heidegger explains:

A tract of land is challenged into the putting out of coal and ore. The earth now reveals itself as a coal mining district, the soil as a mineral deposit. The field that the peasant formerly cultivated and set in order appears differently than it did when to set in order still meant to take care of and to maintain. The

of *Global Education* 68, no. 7 (2012): 461, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02604027.2012.694259?journalCode=gwof20#preview>.

8. Heidegger, "Questions Concerning Technology," 15.

work of the peasant does not challenge the soil of the field. In the sowing of the grain it places the seed in the keeping of the forces of growth and watches over its increase... Agriculture is now the mechanized food industry. Air is now set upon to yield nitrogen, the earth to yield ore.⁹

Through this mechanization and exploitation of nature, we, as existential beings, lose our vital connection to the world in which we have been thrown. (*Thrownness* is the word Heidegger termed to explain the concept of 'having-been-thrown', or having been thrust into a world that all human beings find to be ineluctably important, and inescapable).¹⁰ What we lose is *our* understanding of the way the world works, the way things appear to function naturally. We lose our understanding of the world in its natural state, as it exists without our incessant and destructive challenges against it. The peasant is part of the world authentically and organically; he has accepted and normalized his thrownness for himself. His work does not challenge the soil, and he does not make any attempt to impose his own order over the order that exists within the laws of nature. This understanding of one's place within the overarching context of the natural world as it is and as it appears to function brings existential solace and peace. "Setting-upon" the world and imposing an unnatural order upon it causes us to have a fractured understanding of our place within it, and our existential identity becomes divided and anxious. What results is the loss of comfort and peace brought about by the perception of and compliance with a preexisting natural order.

Our setting a new structure and order upon nature leads to another manner in which we detrimentally alter our experience of nature: we force the world into a state of perpetual "standing by". Heidegger notes, "Everywhere, everything is ordered to stand by, to be immediately at hand, indeed to stand there just so that it may be on call for further ordering... Whatever stands by in the sense of standing-reserve no longer stands over against us as object."¹¹

The consequences that come from the order that we impose, that of standing-reserve upon the environment and the subsequent demotion of everything that has had this order imposed upon it, are unfavorable.

9. Ibid., 16.

10. Wheeler, "Martin Heidegger."

11. Heidegger, "Questions Concerning Technology," 17.

Standing-reserve is a way humanity challenges nature and, by extension, itself. From this structure of standing-by, we not only challenge nature, but also ourselves as human beings to exploit nature using the structure we have built that is grounded in its destruction. In challenging nature and forcing it into a perpetual state of "standing-reserve", mankind is also challenged, and is assimilated in part into the standing-reserve. Heidegger explains,

The forester who, in the wood, measures the felled timber and to all appearances walks the same forest path in the same way as did his grandfather is today commanded by profit-making in the lumber industry, whether he knows it or not. He is made subordinate to the orderability of cellulose, which for its part is challenged forth by the need for paper, which is then delivered to newspapers and illustrated magazines. The latter, in their turn, set public opinion to swallowing what is printed, so that a set configuration of opinion becomes available on demand.¹²

Man is ordered to destroy nature to serve structure and orderability, and as a result belongs in some senses "even more originally than nature within the standing reserve."

When humankind ensnares nature as if it belonged to human conception, humans are challenged to approach nature with research and investigation, until the object itself disappears into the "objectlessness" of standing-reserve.¹³ If our treatment of nature as something from which we must extract resources for the purpose of stockpiling renders our perception of the environment objectless, our subjective experience and perception of nature loses balance, and becomes ungrounded. Without even subjective experiences of objects to ground ourselves upon, we are helplessly disoriented in the experience of a world that we have made. By losing the experience of the original natural world into which we have been thrown, we no longer have the normal existential experience of being stuck in our own perspective. Humankind becomes caught in what Heidegger explains as the ultimate delusion:

Man in the midst of objectlessness is nothing but the orderer of the standing-reserve, then he comes to the very brink of a precipitous fall; that is, he comes to the point where he himself will have to be taken as standing reserve. Meanwhile man, precisely as the one so threatened, exalts himself to the posture of lord of the earth. In this way the impression comes to prevail

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid., 19.

that everything man encounters exists only insofar as it is his construct. This illusion gives rise in turn to one final delusion: It seems as though man everywhere and always encounters only himself... *In truth, however precisely nowhere does man today any longer encounter himself, i.e., his essence.*¹⁴

We are caught between being both the master of our world and its prisoner; caught in the limbo of finding existential solace and taking practical action, ultimately achieving neither.

5. Conclusion: To Take Environmentalist Action As Existentialists

In this essay, I have explained why environmental existentialism is too internally conflicting to effectively gain existential peace and take pragmatic environmentalist action. However, the logical conflict that appears when merging the two philosophies does not necessarily mean that we should not take environmentalist action. On the contrary, since we are fundamentally existential beings due to our epistemological deficiencies, we must take environmentalist action in order to prevent the existential suffering that results from experiencing the degradation of our environment.

Therefore, it is in our best interest as fundamentally existential beings to take environmentalist action and restore the earth to its natural order. We must do this to save ourselves from the existential suffering and anxiety that result from altering our experience and perception of the earth to standing-by and standing-reserve. Standing-reserve challenges the preexisting natural structure of the world, which in turn challenges humankind, first leaving us as no more than the orderers of all that exists in a state of standing-reserve, and finally as a part of it. Our new identification as part of the standing-reserve forces us into a volatile state of existential limbo: we are neither at peace with our "thrownness," nor are we capable of taking practical environmentalist action. We can and must avoid the consequences that result from our altered perception and action by acting conscientiously toward the natural order of our environment, and restoring it. In short, we must recognize ourselves as intrinsically existential, and take environmentalist action that is grounded solely in existential philosophy.

14. Ibid.

Faith Makes Me Nauseous

Jackson Phinney

In a 1959 interview, esteemed French philosopher and public intellectual Jean-Paul Sartre stated that "in Hegel's day history burst forth into philosophy in the form of tragedy; in Kierkegaard's, it was biography in the form of buffoonery or drama."¹ This is overall typical of the manner in which Sartre would speak of these two men, particularly in his later years when he had situated both his philosophy and his person comfortably between them. Even so, we must admit that the tone in which Sartre's criticisms of Kierkegaard are rendered is quite peculiar; for aren't these two men the 'Fathers of Existentialism'? And if so, why does Sartre continually insist upon lampooning Kierkegaard for his apparent preoccupation with the (fundamentally existential) problem of his origins and the content of his own particular existence? Of course, Sartre's engagement with politics would force him increasingly further from his individualistic origins and the self-proclaimed naïveté of his early treatment of subjectivity—and yet, even when we examine these early, overtly existential works, his tact is decidedly different than that of Kierkegaard, and is strangely flaccid by comparison, even in its most radical incarnations. The reason for this, and the reason that, for Sartre, Kierkegaard appears on the world stage as a blithering fool with his eyes full of stars and his pants about his ankles, is that by virtue of his atheism, Sartre refuses to meet Kierkegaard on the latter's *native territory*. With this in mind, I would like to draw a comparison between Kierkegaard's (or Johannes *di Silentio's*) portrayal of Abraham in *Fear and Trembling*, and the aspect which Kierkegaard (or at the very least, his authorship) took on in the eyes of a secular audience, personified in the uber-atheist, Sartre. Kierkegaard acted, and gained what ground he could, in the manner of Abraham: "on the strength of the absurd."² Sartre, I believe, fails to take this into account, and for this reason does not provide the proper backdrop for Kierkegaard's ecstatic performance. Instead of a dance, he perceives but the empty gestures of an egoistic madman.

It is perhaps best to consider *Fear and Trembling* first in this dialogue, for it is through the lens of this book that we may view Kierkegaard's authorship the way he himself viewed it and intended it to be viewed; it

1. Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Purpose of Writing," in *Between Existentialism and Marxism*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (London: Verso, 2008), 11.

2. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin, 2003), 65.

is also with knowledge of this book that we may impart onto the body of Kierkegaard's work a sort of inalienable credence which will allow for its defense. In the book's preface, the pseudonymous Johannes *di Silentio* tells us (in reference not to Sartre, but to Hegel) that he "prostrate[s] [him] self before any systematic bag-searcher: this is not the System, it hasn't the slightest thing to do with the System."³ At the very least, then, *di Silentio* seems to be showing us all of his cards, even if Kierkegaard himself never will, for he specifies outright that this battle will not be fought on the field of 'Hegel's history.' The popular location for philosophical debate has, in this instance, changed venues, and as Kierkegaard acknowledges his inability to engage wholly with the dialectic of Hegel's system, so should Sartre have respected Kierkegaard's *own* dialectic; for in this guise, Kierkegaard, as his pseudonym suggests, "was no thinker, he felt no need to go further than faith."⁴

Fear and Trembling is an analysis of Abraham's absurdity, as well as an exposition of one of Kierkegaard's favorite Christian concepts, the 'Absolute Paradox,' which he frequently brandishes in battles with the Hegelians. As he tells us in his papers, the absolute paradox is "an absurdity that is 'composed in such a way that reason has no power at all to dissolve it'."⁵ Abraham himself, *di Silentio* argues, is an instance of this: he intends to sacrifice his son, Isaac, *because* he loves him and *because* he has faith. "He resigned everything infinitely, and then took everything back on the strength of the absurd."⁶ *di Silentio* maintains that because Abraham had faith, he knew God would spare Isaac, and that for this reason he had to make the attempt. "He believed on the strength of the absurd, for there could be no question of human calculation, and it was indeed absurd that God who demanded this of him should in the next instant withdraw the demand."⁷ *di Silentio* employs Abraham as the purest example of his claim that, in one who has faith, "things [in this world, i.e. Isaac for Abraham] have their value nonetheless, but they have them on their own account and from God."⁸ This notion, that what belongs to us will become ours in a fuller or higher sense if we allot some of this

3. Ibid., 43.

4. Ibid., 44.

5. Mark C. Taylor, "Christology," in *Theological Concepts in Kierkegaard*, ed. George E. Arbaugh (Copenhagen: Reitzels, 1980), 168.

6. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 70.

7. Ibid., 65.

8. Alastair Hannay, introduction to *Fear and Trembling*, Søren Kierkegaard (London: Penguin, 2003).

ownership to God Himself, goes a long way in interpreting Kierkegaard, and indeed forms an (admittedly vexing) force field around the body of his religious works. Faith *is* the absurd; those who act upon it and live within it are empowered precisely through this absurdity, and this renders both their speech and actions impervious to our rational faculties. Abraham tried to kill the son he loved *because* he loved him and *because* he had faith. Literally no other explanation can be given. The result was that he fully gained Isaac only because he tried to kill him. Realistically, who could argue with this incomprehensible dialectic? When Sartre takes aim at Kierkegaard, it is like listening to a stuffy teacher who has kept Abraham after class in order to calmly explain to him why attempting to kill his son was a bad idea. *di Silentio*, then, speaks of Kierkegaard too when he asks of Abraham, "After all, who could have understood him?"⁹

Because Kierkegaard offered himself up as a martyr in this manner, and because his struggle to clarify faith in a feckless world rendered his life, in his own words to his brother, a "great and to others unknown and incomprehensible suffering," it is natural for someone like Sartre to crucify this man who keeps telling everyone, in one voice or another, to do just that.¹⁰ This is not to say that Kierkegaard had a Christ complex (he may have), or believed himself to be Abraham (also possible), or even necessarily had faith (although in some form he seems to); but his absurd crusade certainly had more in common with the inner lives of Christ and Abraham than with that of Sartre or Hegel. For Sartre, Kierkegaard is but "an existent announcer of existence by virtue of his own existential attitude," a "moment of universal History vainly posed for itself," "the Knight of Subjectivity."¹¹ Faced with these epithets, we are bound to notice that Sartre is trafficking in the very terms which the religious Kierkegaard necessarily eschewed. Nowhere does Sartre acknowledge Kierkegaard's Christianity except to note that the religion itself is but a myth which has caused Kierkegaard to appear foolish within the phenomenological drama of history—but here we must ask, in what manner is this to attack a religious man? It is as if Sartre had informed Kierkegaard that Santa is not real, and then set about ridiculing him for his naïveté. The fact remains, however, that for Kierkegaard *God is not Santa*, and he is categorically

9. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 55.

10. Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino, *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 6.

11. Jean-Paul Sartre, "Kierkegaard: The Singular Universal," in *Between Existentialism and Marxism*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (London: Verso, 2008), 143, 145, 141.

incapable of dispelling his conception of the divine in the same manner as if it were all but a ridiculous fantasy. Sartre would do well to remember that what he perceives as Kierkegaard's Quixotic struggle with a phantom is, for Kierkegaard, quite literally a clash with a giant; and as *di Silentio* reminds us, a man is "great in proportion to what he *strove with*."¹²

Sartre is correct to note that "Kierkegaard himself is the scandal and the paradox," but wrong to continue that "What will attract our attention then will not be the religious problem of Christ incarnate nor the metaphysical problem of death, but the strictly historical paradox of survival."¹³ For here we must note that if, in Sartre's modern conception, Kierkegaard was somehow blinded by his conception of the divine and thereby unable to fight a 'real' battle, Sartre is blind as well, for he cannot see the God in whom Kierkegaard legitimately believed and with whom he was therefore in *legitimate engagement*. Kierkegaard may be engaged with but the phantom of God; it is true. But then it is also true that Sartre engages with the phantom of Kierkegaard, for he battles with him in a world which Kierkegaard did not inhabit and did not care to, a world without a divine origin or a deity. Sartre believes that Hegel 'predicted' Kierkegaard, and that Kierkegaard "was trapped and held in the beam of the Hegelian projector."¹⁴ This may be so, but in some sense Kierkegaard predicted the likes of Sartre, for, as Kierkegaard commentator W. von Kloeden notes, "The world mocks the (spiritually awake), but they welcome it as assurance that they are of the awakened."¹⁵ Kierkegaard knew precisely what he was doing: *Fear and Trembling* is a book-length effort to equate faith with absurdity; he knew he was walking the loneliest of all roads in his authorship, and yet he did not do it *for himself*, as the whole of Sartre's criticism implies by virtue of its atheistic lilt. When Sartre notes that "Hegel's designation reached (Kierkegaard) like the light from a dead star," he ought to note that his own criticisms touch our conception of Kierkegaard in the same manner.¹⁶

The inability of Kierkegaard's authorship to speak directly to Sartre, and the conspicuous absence of what we might call the 'Kierkegaardian infinity' within Sartre's works, can be witnessed directly in the dialogue between

Fear and Trembling and Sartre's existentialist manifesto, *Nausea*. Indeed it may be said that when we speak of the relationship between Sartre and Kierkegaard (and when Sartre speaks of it himself), we often speak as if Kierkegaard really was his characterization of Abraham, and Sartre a glorified version of *Nausea*'s dithering protagonist, Antoine Roquentin. This is of course incorrect, and yet there are significant parallels between Kierkegaard and Abraham insofar as each acts on the strength of the 'Christian absurd,' and between Sartre and Roquentin, particularly when one considers that the contents of *Being and Nothingness*, a self-proclaimed "essay on phenomenological ontology," align neatly with the philosophy forwarded in *Nausea*. This may help us to understand not only why Kierkegaard and Sartre see the world through different obscuring lenses, as it were, but also why Sartre goes so far as to *describe* Kierkegaard, as if the lenses through which he viewed him were the only ones that existed.

Nausea tells the story of a man for whom words lose their meaning, and upon whom sheer existence encroaches as if it were a great malicious fog: "I am alone in the midst of Things," Roquentin laments, "which cannot be given names. Alone, wordless, defenseless...existence is penetrating me all over, through the eyes, through the nose, through the mouth."¹⁷ Here we may see some corollaries to the version of faith posited in *Fear and Trembling*. For Kierkegaard (or at least Abraham, although this view is also forwarded in his 'Edifying Discourses'), it is not as if the world were a veil behind which one glimpses God from time to time—on the contrary, it may be said that "in terms of a new understanding of faith, he sees that faith involves the importance of receiving the finite, of commensurability with actuality."¹⁸ This is to say that Kierkegaard's conception of Christianity, and that within it which allows *di Silentio* to proclaim that Abraham "in fact...gained everything and kept Isaac" while focused upon objects in the immediate world and their ability to transcend themselves in their religious reality, is precisely the opposite of Roquentin's nausea.¹⁹

Strangely enough, the isolated symptoms are quite similar. What Roquentin 'suffers' from is an awareness of the "transphenomenality of Being," a theory that Sartre later develops extensively in *Being and Nothingness*.²⁰

12. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 50.

13. Sartre, "Kierkegaard: The Singular Universal," 142.

14. *Ibid.*, 144.

15. W. von Kloeden, "The Mockery of Christ," in *Theological Concepts in Kierkegaard*, ed. George E. Arbaugh (Copenhagen: Reitzels, 1980).

16. Sartre, "Kierkegaard: The Singular Universal," 145.

17. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. Robert Baldick (London: Penguin, 2000) 180, 181.

18. James Ferreira, "Describing What You Cannot Understand: Another Look at *Fear and Trembling*," *Kierkegaardiana* 24 (2007): 99.

19. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 56.

20. Hazel E. Barnes, introduction to *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966), xix.

Roquentin perceives that an object's sheer existence perpetually overflows any and all distinctions or qualifications we make in an effort to categorize it: this aspect of 'Absolute Being' ploughs over any functions which an object may serve, any cognitive effort to denote and thereby limit the crudeness of the matter which comprises all objects. This matter is by definition the necessary excess of simply existing. In a strange way, the physical world is sanctified by Roquentin's condition—indeed he describes it as being “plunged into a horrible ecstasy...in the very heart of that ecstasy.”²¹ Within *Fear and Trembling* this is analogous to Abraham's belief that he will not have to sacrifice Isaac to God, thereby casting what he loves out of the world and releasing it into another, higher realm, but that Isaac will remain here with him, entrenched in earthly time. Even though Isaac will be consecrated once God has spared him, and therefore will become 'new' in some sense, it will still be precisely Isaac who makes Abraham happy; for it is not the blessing in which he rejoices, but that which has been blessed, because it exists and because it has been blessed. It is as if his favorite stuffed animal had suddenly come to life: he has always loved it, but suddenly it is *real* in a new and different sense. This, in turn, renders his love for it somehow 'more real,' because it has been legitimized, sanctioned, removed from the realm of personal uncertainty.

Both Abraham's faith and Roquentin's nausea occasion a literal rebirth of empirical reality. After the attempted sacrifice at Mount Moriah, Abraham's world is flooded with blessedness, and his life becomes a plenum of holy joy, each object animated and characterized in equal part by its sheer existence and through its cohabitation with God. Indeed in describing the 'Knight of Faith' *di Silentio* stresses this worldliness: “One detects [in the Knight of Faith] nothing of the strangeness and superiority that mark the knight of the infinite. This man takes pleasure, takes part, in everything, and whenever one catches him occupied with something his engagement has the persistence of the worldly person whose soul is wrapped up in such things.”²² In the same breath he describes the alternative which is, quite literally, a description of Roquentin's nausea: the faithless “fall into an animal stupor that gapes at existence and they think they have seen something.”²³ This, alongside Roquentin's claim that “I had learned everything I could know about existence...I was suffocating at the

bottom of this huge boredom”!²⁴ For Roquentin, the veil is lifted and there is nothing behind it but a colossal Being-ness, the same quality which imparts boundless joy onto Abraham's earthly life simply because, for him, it derives from a different source, somehow authored and authorized in the same breath. So when Roquentin has his fantasia of Existence gone wild, in which “clothes become living things...and somebody else will feel something scratching inside of his mouth...and his tongue will have become a huge living centipede, rubbing its legs together and scraping his palate,” we recognize it as somehow identical to Abraham's condition (for in faith, too, Abraham's world literally becomes living and animated through God *and the fact that it exists in the first place*) as well as totally removed from it, because Abraham has awoken to a beautiful new world, whereas Roquentin has drifted off into a hideous nightmare.²⁵ Indeed, Roquentin's description of a future in which “one morning, when people open their blinds they will be surprised by a sort of horrible feeling brooding heavily over things and giving the impression of waiting” is telling: certainly the “feeling” he speaks of is Existence, and yet it is here indistinguishable from a displeased God.²⁶

It is because of the nausea—because of the “Transphenomenality of being”—that Kierkegaard's movements are incomprehensible, even infuriating, to Sartre. Because (the religious) Kierkegaard's world has been animated by faith in a higher power, and because Sartre's world is engendered through a perceived certainty that such faith is absurd, the two men *can never meet* at a single point. If they appear to, it is not really so. Certainly they can coexist, even debate one another, but such debate will take on the character of two men from different worlds yelling at one another in alien tongues, as *di Silentio* himself predicts in *Fear and Trembling*. Kierkegaard acknowledges atheism through his concession that faith appears absurd to the atheist by its very nature; Sartre does not concede that, to those with faith, he too appears absurd and misguided. When Roquentin confesses, in a fit of nausea, “that tree root—there was nothing in relation to which it was not absurd,” he speaks, too, of Kierkegaard's God, as if even the hollowed-out concept of this creator could have no more significance, or even size, than a rock or a bit of dirt.²⁷ As Roquentin himself says, “Absurd: irreducible: nothing”—he suffers, in his

21. Sartre, *Nausea*, 188.

22. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 68.

23. *Ibid.*

24. Sartre, *Nausea*, 193.

25. *Ibid.*, 226.

26. *Ibid.*, 226-227.

27. *Ibid.*, 185.

stubbornness, from a perspectival shift which elevates all things to the same mid-way level and promptly leaves them there, without bothering to consider, for him or anyone else, what might be *above*.²⁸

We have, then, four men: Kierkegaard, Sartre, Abraham, and Roquentin. Who amongst them, in Sartre's own words, enacts "biography in the form of buffoonery or drama?" It depends, of course, on who is speaking. Kierkegaard and Abraham fight with the same sword and in front of the same backdrop—neither of which Sartre and Roquentin are capable of divesting of their apparent cardboard quality. One must admit that Roquentin, reeling, afraid to touch chairs and trees because they exist, unable to speak or move because he is afraid *to Exist*, appears to be much more of a buffoon than Abraham, and is, if nothing else, putting on quite the drama. Roquentin fights Nothing with a very convincing sword in front of no backdrop; for Kierkegaard, this action would appear not only uninteresting but also quite literally insane. As James Wood's introduction to *Nausea* notes, "From this sense of absolute freedom is born anguish, a sense of dread."²⁹ Indeed, but this "absolute freedom" is by its very nature solipsistic—if Roquentin cannot subscribe to God, he could at least engage in a legitimate dialogue with another human being if he would just stop lumping them with evil tree roots and dethroned concepts. Abraham's "teleological suspension of the ethical" may be above ethics, but only because it has, in this special case, passed all the way through them, and legitimately transcended them.³⁰ Roquentin's nausea may believe itself to be above ethics, but it is in fact infinitely below them.

Faith and nausea, which originally appeared to be a set of poles with nothing but void space between them, here take on the aspect of a spectrum: for between them there is a whole world of legitimate personal fulfillment and, far more importantly, interpersonal interactions. Nausea is a supremely lonely place, as is faith, as *di Silentio* stresses again and again. Perhaps the solution, then, for all of us who are neither Abraham nor Roquentin, is to simply choose a more populous destination.

28. Ibid.

29. James Wood, introduction to *Nausea*, Jean-Paul Sartre (London: Penguin, 2000), xvi.

30. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 85.

The Fall and Rediscovery

Anders Wennberg

A man's work is nothing but this slow trek to rediscover, through the detours of art, those two or three great and simple images in whose presence his heart first opened.

- Albert Camus

The Fall is a literary extrapolation of Albert Camus' metaphysics in which Camus uses the parable of Jean Baptiste-Clamence and the aphorisms therein to act as a prism through which we can gain further insight into our "shoulds" of normative behavior. Clamence witnesses the suicide of a woman who jumps into a river and does not attempt to save her, which haunts him as he wrestles with his inaction and ethical responsibility. Throughout the novel, Clamence explores religious motifs in coping with his fall. Clamence both accepts and rejects Christian values while trying to uncover the mysteries of ethical decision-making. Similarly, Camus mocks religious ideas while concurrently using them to elucidate his notions of responsibility and guilt, revealing the duality of human nature. Camus frames the novel through a first-person narrative, in which Clamence explores Christian faith and its application in the real world. In doing so, Camus deviates from his typically secular philosophy and provides an account of judgment and self-indictment using Christian motifs. In this essay, I will investigate the purpose of Camus' dialectical and dualistic usage of Christianity in the character of Clamence. Though Camus' use of religious imagery is ironic at times, I argue that he uses Christian themes to emphasize the importance of rediscovery and existential reflection within his philosophy.

Toward the end of the novel, Clamence describes religion as a tool to exercise our propensity for judgment and relief from responsibility. He maintains that we all judge each other and ourselves; the difference lies within our reasoning and rationale for doing so. Some use God and the commandments to moralize their own actions and condemn others, while others do not need God-given rules to dictate their moral behavior, and revile at those who choose otherwise.

Believe me, religions are on the wrong track the moment they moralize and fulminate commandments. God is not needed to create guilt or to punish. Our fellow men suffice aided by ourselves. You were speaking of the Last Judgment. Allow me

to laugh respectfully. I shall wait for it resolutely, for I have known what is worse, the judgment of men.¹

Clamence denounces those who use God to justify their judgments of others under the guise of religious 'morality.' In doing so, one can defer moral culpability to God to relieve one's self of the burden of responsibility. It is easier to continue judging if one is exempt from the responsibility of judgment—one judges for God. Guilt and punishment do not come from God, but from men as a whole. Given Clamence's criticism of Christianity, the opinion of others, rather than God's, dictates the rules of morality: "[T]heir lord is neither in the attic nor in the cellar. They have hoisted him onto a judge's bench, in the secret of their hearts, and they smite, they judge above all, they judge in his name"². From this perspective, those who uphold morals for the Highest do so to appear as the highest. They project a lucid image of goodness to conceal the absence of good within them.

Moral deceivers construct the good as an image magnificently similar to God—an image that fundamentally benefits them. The trick lies within being able to strip God's image of the periwig and gavel. The deceivers hoist God onto the judge's bench and use Him as a tool for the careful and surreptitious denunciation of others, the less moral: "But too many people now climb onto the cross merely to be seen from a greater distance, even if they have to trample somewhat on the one who has been there so long. Too many people have decided to do without generosity in order to practice charity"³. Morality, from this perspective, consists in the proclamation rather than the actual action. The moral deceivers cry louder from a bigger soapbox for everyone to see how good they actually are; but the soapbox can only hold a few, the timber comes from the small crosses around the listeners' necks, and if anyone asks questions, they point to the gilded, unopened book that they've been shaking above their heads—all to save their image. According to Clamence's conception of Christianity, very few practice true generosity and those who do often fail to recognize it as such.

1. Albert Camus, *The Fall*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage Random House, 1991), 110.

2. Ibid., 115.

3. Ibid., 114.

If good intention becomes the intention to be judged as good, then religion disguises the uglier aspects of human nature. If one's reasons for doing good are solely constituted in obeying authority under the microscope of others' perceptions, the good ceases to exist. "In the guise of a tortured soul, he plays out his 'shell game' with his interlocutor/reader. No matter what shell we lift, a truth rooted in absolute authority cannot be found. If we accept the rules of Clamence's game, human life is synonymous with deception and illusion"⁴. Under Wheeler's reading, Clamence claims that human life consists in deceiving the other(s) to appear good; the dualistic opposition between one's pursuit of goodness and how the other perceives it. The deception lies in appearing to be morally upstanding, regardless of whether one actually believes or practices moral responsibility. This contrasts with the ideals of Christianity that emphasize fear of God and His absolute authority to reserve one's place in heaven. Clamence only seems religious insofar as he uses religious language to reveal humanity's true appropriation of religion. Here, Camus illustrates the absence of religion in ethical action: goodness and ethical behavior should originate and end in one's subjective personal reasoning. He explores the ideas of grace and redemption only as disguises for true human nature. In doing so, a tension of duality emerges. Camus distances himself from religious accountability, yet fervently uses Christian concepts to describe the human condition.

Later, Clamence introduces a different way to think about Christ and his death; he humanizes Jesus by describing the overwhelming guilt and responsibility that he must have felt. From this angle, Christ becomes as vulnerable to emotions as any other. Consider these two quotes:

...there was a major one for that terrible agony, and I don't know why it has been so carefully hidden. The real reason is that he knew he was not altogether innocent...He was at the source, after all; he must have heard of a certain Slaughter of Innocents...why did they die if not because of him?⁵

Brought face to face day and night with his innocent crime, he found it was too hard for him to hold on and continue. It was better to have done with it, not to defend himself, to be, in order

4. Burton M. Wheeler, "Beyond Despair: Camus' *The Fall* and Van Eyck's 'Adoration of the Lamb,'" *Contemporary Literature* 23, no. 3 (1982): 358.

5. Camus, *The Fall*, 112.

not to be the only one to live, and go elsewhere where perhaps he would be upheld.⁶

On Clamence's reckoning, Jesus feels responsible for all of the people that died on his account. Christ becomes the source of anguish, misery, and human degradation. He deems Christ's crucifixion as the epitome of morality and guilt: when the time comes for His death, He meets it not with resistance, but with relief. In this interpretation, Christ accepts his death because he is not able to withstand his moral culpability:

Clamence proclaims Jesus as his "friend"—a mortal soul racked by his own supersensitivity. In rescuing Jesus from the church which has falsely represented him as divine, Clamence opens the way for his own enthronement where he can exercise the prerogatives of his new pontificate.⁷

Wheeler explains that Jesus feels release from the world through his death and does not fight his conviction, becoming an example for all humans who cannot cope with the responsibility and guilt inherent to existence. Every failure to uphold responsibility to others weighs down upon one's existence. Maybe, like Clamence, you did not jump into the water to save another's life, or perhaps you let down a good friend; the fall from grace can be big or small, but haunting nonetheless. Clamence replaces Jesus with himself, and replaces himself with all of us, uncovering our secular relation to Christ through our falls. Clamence carefully applies the typically holy and unattainable qualities of Jesus to an experience in which we all participate.

Through Clamence, Camus strips religion of its explicitly biblical and traditional characteristics. Camus' analysis of the Bible uses the story of Jesus to describe very human problems. He accuses Christianity of being the vehicle of human judgment: "The allusions serve to suggest that the fall must be viewed as representations by one who is the 'aggregate of the vices of our whole generation'."⁸ Camus, therefore, uses Clamence as a tool to indict men and illuminate the vices and wickedness disguised in moral Christian values. In *The Fall*, Camus makes clear his view that religion lacks virtue and removes the responsibility for judgment and guilt

religion lacks virtue and removes the responsibility for judgment and guilt that all ultimately face as a necessary condition for a reflective existence.

Clamence distances himself from the Christian concepts of grace, redemption, and repentance, yet proclaims that he is a prophet. Carefully, he walks the line between preaching the Bible and rejecting its traditional interpretations. If Camus uses Clamence to expound upon the ironies and deception of conventional religion, then why does Clamence continually return to them? Either Camus leaves room for doubt in his condemnation of religious deception, or he gives the impression that the religious aphorisms are cited sardonically only to be bashed and rejected.

The sardonic interpretation claims that Camus elucidates ironies in the history of Jesus and within Christianity as a whole. "In Clamence's frequent references to Christ, his phrasing seems to be attentive to a visual reference. At the very least, the images of the painting reiterate those paradoxes which fascinate and repel Clamence and which he can see only as ironies."⁹ Camus satirically pursues these Christian themes to rob them of their meaning to believers. He uses Clamence to express his discontent and comical disbelief of society's almost-blind acceptance and dilution of the meaningful secular messages within biblical stories. "Camus is profoundly opposed to all Christianity stands for: first the notions of incarnation, of grace, of redemption, of repentance and of collective guilt for some sin committed, unbeknown to us."¹⁰ Henri Peyre's analysis of Camus is consistent with that of Wheeler: Camus uses the story of Jesus in jest to describe human problems necessitated by existence. Camus accuses Christianity and God of being the façade of ugly judgments that humans push upon each other. Jesus' story becomes the story of us all and not of a superhuman deity: "The allusions serve to suggest that the fall must be viewed as representations by one who is the 'aggregate of the vices of our whole generation'."¹¹ Camus uses Clamence as a tool to uncover the judgment within Christianity, yet man uses Christianity as a tool to conceal his own vices. Camus makes it clear that religion is fundamentally not virtuous and that if one pursues it, one avoids responsibility for judgment and guilt.

Clamence, however, maintains the duality between religious concepts and

6. Ibid., 113.

7. Wheeler, "Beyond Despair," 356.

8. Ibid., 363.

9. Ibid., 350.

10. Henri Peyre, "Camus the Pagan," *Yale French Studies* 25 (1960): 23.

11. Wheeler, "Beyond Despair," 363.

their secular denunciation. Why does he continually return to the concepts that he simultaneously rejects? Clamence cannot fully consummate his secular disbelief in the ideals that his biblical aphorisms support. He continuously reaffirms his rejection of redemption and forgiveness, but cannot let go of his hope. "Clamence cannot believe in the saving grace of the Christian faith, but neither can he quite disentangle himself from its promise...He will continue to hope for, although disbelieving in, forgiveness and cleansing from outside himself."¹² This is contradictory and inconsistent with Camus' ideas about the Christian faith and his secular philosophy. If Clamence's character is another medium for Camus to explicate his concept of hope as an illusion, *The Fall* cannot be reconciled with his secular philosophy. "Camus indicts hope as a form of resignation, robbing man of energies which he needs, in order to enrich a god who 'hardly needs them.'" ¹³ If Camus develops his belief in the absence of hope, then Clamence does not represent Camus' ideal man. Perhaps, then, Clamence is the reflection of society. He pursues the ideals of secular existentialism and rejects religious value, only to return in the end.

This return reflects the human fear of death, the impossibility of redemption, and the unknown. Camus might suggest that it is natural to make this return, but what follows is ambiguous. The question remains of whether or not we continue on through the charade only to arrive again at the same conclusions. If that is the case, then perhaps Clamence recalls the same abandoned hope to suggest the possibility of something better. Why should we waste our time with the silly questions and ironic interpretations of the Christian faith only to rediscover that we cannot live without that hope? Christians could readily accept *The Fall* as a text that reflects upon religion's importance – how true generosity and religious moral values can be lost, but returning to the faith is inevitable. "If one were Christian and anxious to claim Camus for the faith, it [would be] attractive to conceive of Jean-Baptiste's apparent longing for grace as a surrogate plea from Camus himself."¹⁴ Wheeler suggests that the rediscovery and return to hope is Camus' religious plea through Clamence, though this seems doubtful given Camus' staunch opposition to religious doctrine. There is a contradiction between Camus' belief of a secular life divorced from religion and his character's rediscovery of religious hope. Camus uses Clamence to condemn religion as guise for immoral action, that is certain;

12. Ibid., 362.

13. Peyre, "Camus the Pagan," 23.

14. Wheeler, "Beyond Despair," 344.

but we are left with an ambiguity, or at the very least an inconsistency unexplained.

I argue that Camus contradicts his own secular philosophy at the end of *The Fall* to compel his readers to more intently address their interpretations of hope. He encourages his readers to experience the cognitive dissonance between man's natural attraction to hope for redemption and the reality that such hope is unattainable. Camus, even in other texts, uses this notion of a return, or relapse, to thoughts about hope, death, and existence. The return is important for Camus, who requests that his readers ponder these ideas. The duality between the rejection and affirmation of hope emphasizes how we act on a daily basis: we struggle with the important considerations of reflective existence. It is easy to dismiss the big questions about the meaning of life and how we should exist. We contemplate these ideas but never come to a conclusion, yet neither does Clamence. Camus prods us to explore what we believe as real and true in our reality. Through Clamence, Camus elucidates the considerations of guilt and responsibility that both believers and non-believers experience.

But the hero of *The Fall* is an embittered, sarcastic nihilist, a garrulous talker merging his own guilt in the guilt which he instills in all those whom he forces to listen to him. If anything, that baffling tale should be read as a satire in the self indictment practiced by Christians and atheistic existentialists alike.¹⁵

Camus has written a book that is riddled with aphorisms, condemnations of others and of oneself, and provocative ideas that apply to the existence of atheists and Christians alike. Just as the Bible should not be taken as an absolute and divinely ordained law, *The Fall* should not be interpreted as Camus' philosophical creed. This novel offers a brilliant depiction of how society functions, and how one grapples with important ideas about hope and redemption: "Everyone will be saved, eh? –and not only the elect. Possessions and hardships will be shared and you, for example, from today on will sleep every night on the ground for me."¹⁶ It outlines the important problems of existence that many face; it instructs the reader to contemplate his or her subjective reality. Camus describes the duplicity of the human condition and reinforces the existentialist idea of subjective

15. Peyre, "Camus the Pagan," 23.

16. Camus, *The Fall*, 145.

reality, yet simultaneously offers advice and practical analysis of some of our most important problems. Camus suggests that few even consider the burden of responsibility, much less bear its true weight: "On his bewildered face, half hidden by his hand, I read the melancholy of the common condition and the despair of not being able to escape it."¹⁷ The reader needs to digest the ideas within this novel's pages and continue to battle with the dilemmas that entangle one between judgment and redemption, the duplicity of existence. The guilt and responsibility that Camus discusses is deeply embedded within all of us. Regret is a necessary component of a reflective existence and it occurs almost daily. *The Fall* does not completely condemn and deny religion but aligns it with the meditation, reflectivity, and inwardness that the Bible preaches.

Religious or not, I argue that the return and rediscovery that Camus prescribes should be practiced by all. The suggested reflective existence makes clear our role as Atlas, holding up our world of guilt for our falls. One must return to the seed, the first question, as the basis of the tree of beliefs and actions strung together in existence. This tree comprises our identity and we are thus responsible for it. One should be able to make certain of all that is around her, return to her original questions, and begin again. Contemplation of the 'what could have' and the 'what should have,' is a reflection in which we all share. "Are we not all alike, constantly talking and to no one, forever up against the same questions although we know the answers in advance?"¹⁸ One must practice careful consideration of actions and their consequences. The true weight of responsibility can only be discovered by inward reflection and a careful consideration of what is important in one's existence. Man's duplicity entertains belief and disbelief, but we still must continue on, for we cannot escape it. "Come now, admit that you would be flabbergasted if a chariot came down from heaven to carry me off, or if the snow suddenly caught fire. You don't believe it? Nor do I. But still I must go out."¹⁹

17. Ibid., 143.

18. Ibid., 147.

19. Ibid., 146.