

DAWES HICKS LECTURE ON PHILOSOPHY

KIERKEGAARD'S TWO WAYS

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THERE is a well-known passage in one of his books in which Søren Kierkegaard describes how, as a young man, he sat in a café in Copenhagen, contemplating the careers of his contemporaries and wondering what he should do with his own life. How was he to avoid growing into an old man who had never really achieved anything?

... Suddenly this thought flashed through my mind: 'You must do something, but inasmuch as with your limited capacities it will be impossible to make anything easier than it has become, you must, with the same humanitarian enthusiasm as the others, undertake to make something harder.' This notion pleased me immensely. . . . Out of love for mankind, and out of despair at my embarrassing situation, seeing that I had accomplished nothing and was unable to make anything easier than it had already been made, . . . I conceived it as my task to create difficulties everywhere.<sup>1</sup>

The terms in which Kierkegaard thus envisaged his future as a writer accurately prefigured the stark and angular thinker he later became. All his major works were written in a spirit of protest, and gave expression to a profound and anguished dissatisfaction with prevailing modes of life and opinion. He stigmatized his society, its shibboleths and prejudices, its cult of conformity; he continuously attacked current dogmas and habits of thought that smothered understanding and anaesthetized feeling; he sought to expose false notions of what it is to live and behave as a human being. So-called 'enlightened' opinion—as found, for example, in university or academic circles—had not only failed to combat these pervasive evils: it also, in Kierkegaard's eyes, lay open to the more serious reproach of having gone out of its way to promote and encourage them. In such a context he saw himself as occupying an

<sup>1</sup> *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. D. F. Swenson and W. Lowrie, pp. 165–6.

'exceptional' position, one that imposed upon him the role of diagnosing and throwing into relief the errors and confusions that beset his complacent age. Throughout the eighteen forties, during which most of his numerous writings were produced, he worked in a kind of fever of creative energy, pouring out books (many under pseudonyms) and dedicating (in his own words) 'my life with every ounce of my poor ability to the service of an idea'. Nor can this burst of literary activity be said to have assuaged his discontent and his sense of isolation. In the early fifties a growing antipathy towards the established Danish church ultimately found outlet in a series of violent articles occasioned by the death of the Bishop of Zealand. This incident caused a scandal at the time, and representations were made calling for governmental intervention to prevent Kierkegaard publishing further attacks. In the event, however, such action proved unnecessary. Within a year he was safely out of the way, dying—a bitter and exhausted man—in November 1855.

The provincial controversies which engaged Kierkegaard's attention in the last years of his life seem of little significance today: yet the same could hardly be maintained of his stature as a philosopher and religious thinker. He is popularly, and with reason, regarded as a progenitor of existentialism in many of its diverse forms: more generally, he is seen as a seminal influence whose ideas have helped to alter, in distinctive if subtle ways, the contours of the intellectual landscape. Kafka spoke of him in his Diaries as being 'on the same side of the world' as himself, and other writers have felt Kierkegaard to be curiously attuned to modern sensibilities. Even so, he remains beyond question an elusive and forbidding figure, whom talk and time have not made more homely or approachable. In part this is due to the genuine novelty and complexity of what he was trying to communicate. There are, however, other reasons. Much of his work gives the impression of having been almost designed to escape clear statement or definition; whilst not exactly vague or fuzzy, what he writes is often gratuitously paradoxical, and tends to be presented in a self-consciously oblique manner that can be rather irritating. He is given to repetition, and has a further disconcerting habit of interspersing discursive and rambling passages with others that are of an extreme compression. Nor is his logic above criticism. Arguments, propounded with some show of rigour, are apt to look less impressive on analysis: moreover, despite his professed scorn for the bloodless categories of Hegelian metaphysics and

his insistence upon the concrete realities of individual experience, he is himself liable to employ an abstract jargon that on occasions comes close to being impenetrable. Thus, when characterizing the nature of the 'self' in one of his works, he opens by describing it as 'a relation which relates itself to its own self'.<sup>1</sup> Though it must always be unfair to criticize a philosopher on the basis of quotations torn out of context, the fact remains that, even when they are read in their proper setting, some of Kierkegaard's statements make doubtful sense.

Here, then, are some of the features that render Kierkegaard a difficult and intractable author. It would nevertheless be wrong to suggest that all his writings suffer in the same degree from such peculiarities of style and exposition. There are times when he expresses himself with considerable force and eloquence, and when the significance of his preoccupations is firmly impressed upon the reader's mind: if problems remain, these arise more from what he says than from the way in which he says it. One work that falls into the latter category is the famous *Either/Or*, and in particular the long section to which he gave the cumbersome title of 'Equilibrium between the Aesthetical and the Ethical in the composition of the Personality'. It is with this that I shall be largely concerned in what follows.

*Either/Or* is an early work—it was written in 1842—and it does not exhibit the central concern with religious matters that was to dominate so much of what Kierkegaard wrote afterwards. Yet many of the ideas underlying subsequent writings are here put forward for the first time, together with a number of the original psychological observations and conceptions that he was later to develop with great insight. Like his other books, too, it reflects a certain tense involvement in his situation as a man and as a writer, and can be appreciated in one way as an attempt to come to terms with his character and predicament. From this point of view his previous career offers a helpful guide to understanding.

Kierkegaard was born in 1813, the youngest son of a deeply religious but guilt-ridden father from whom it appears that he inherited both his intellectual powers and his melancholy disposition. After an upbringing he was later to describe as 'insane' he attended Copenhagen University as a theology student. The choice of subject seems to have been largely determined by a desire to please his father; in any event,

<sup>1</sup> *The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. W. Lowrie, p. 17.

Kierkegaard's interests quickly developed in other directions, particularly towards literature and philosophy. He was attracted by Goethe and the German romantics; and he was introduced to the ideas of two thinkers who, in very different ways, were to exercise a powerful influence upon his own future development—the eighteenth-century anti-rationalist and mystic, Hamann, and the more celebrated Hegel. This period of his life was also marked by estrangement from his family and by the adoption of a mode of behaviour strikingly at variance with the stern ideals taught him at home. He drank, got into debt, neglected his university studies, and spent a good deal of his time in cafés and in going to the theatre and opera; there are grounds, too, for thinking that he paid one (rather unsuccessful) visit to a brothel.

Such defiantly ostentatious pursuit of pleasure was accompanied by a deep inner unhappiness. In a diary entry of this time (April 1836) he wrote: 'I have just returned from a party of which I was the life and soul; wit poured from my lips, everyone laughed and admired me—but I went away—and the dash should be as long as the earth's orbit—and wanted to shoot myself.' He came to realize that the peculiar stringency of his father's religious convictions and demands were rooted in a consciousness of personal sin (his wife was a servant-girl whom he had seduced before marriage); the shock of this discovery plunged Kierkegaard into an intense spiritual crisis and led him, amongst other things, to a fundamental re-examination of Christian doctrines. The death of the old man in 1838 seems, however, to have brought him some kind of release. He at last applied himself seriously to his examinations, taking his finals in theology two years later and shortly afterwards getting engaged. The story of his engagement to Regine Olsen is familiar from his account of it in his journals, though the information he gives there cannot be said to provide a wholly convincing explanation of his motives. The bare facts are that he regretted his decision within a day of proposing, and that after an uneasy year he ended the relationship; in doing so he affected an extreme callousness, as this was 'the only thing I could do to get her adrift again and push her into marrying someone else'. Certainly the event represented a landmark in his career and was of immense significance from the point of view of his later thought and writing, affording much of the inspiration and material for such works as *Repetition*, *Fear and Trembling*, and *Stages on Life's Way*. There are also disguised

references to it, as well as to his relationship with his father, in *Either/Or*—the book he wrote almost immediately after the episode.

*Either/Or* purports to describe two opposed views of life, the first termed 'aesthetic', the second 'ethical'. They are presented in the form of separate sets of papers and letters, one set being ascribed to an anonymous individual referred to as 'A', the other to an older man, Judge Wilhelm. Nevertheless, as Kierkegaard himself points out in his Preface,<sup>1</sup> they can be looked at as 'the work of one man . . . who had lived through both . . . phases, or who had thought upon both'; and it would anyway be difficult, even without this hint, not to regard the outlooks portrayed as corresponding to two stages—roughly divided by a change of attitude that occurred in the later half of 1836—into which his own life had fallen. From this standpoint it might be tempting to treat the book simply as a kind of spiritual autobiography, even as a literary exercise in self-therapy. No doubt it was in part both these things. Yet that Kierkegaard's intentions in writing it were of a more ambitious and far-reaching character can be seen from a reference he made some years after its publication, when he spoke of it as involving an 'indirect polemic against speculative philosophy, which is indifferent to the existential'. At first glance the remark appears a puzzling one: for instance, *Either/Or* contains no detailed analysis of metaphysical aims and procedures, nor is there any attempt to marshal systematic objections to Platonism or to the ideas of Hegel and his followers such as one finds in works like *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* and *Philosophical Fragments*. A brief consideration of some of the views advanced in these later books may, however, help to explain his somewhat cryptic comment.

Generally speaking, it was Kierkegaard's contention that philosophy, as pursued in the grand speculative tradition, rested upon a confusion of thought with reality, essence with existence. Hegel was, for him, the supreme modern representative of this tendency, seeking to exhibit the world, and man's place within the world, in terms of the development of a set of fundamental logical categories. Consequently the universe, when philosophically understood, took the form of an

<sup>1</sup> Vol. i, p. 13. This, and all further references to *Either/Or*, are to the Doubleday Edition in two volumes, translated by D. F. and L. M. Swenson and W. Lowrie (1959).

ordered totality, governed by principles that rendered it intelligible, under all its diverse aspects, to abstract reason. Hence the famous 'System', which—with its proclaimed 'unity of essence with existence', its vaunted identification of the rational with the actual—prompted Kierkegaard's gibe that Hegel 'had seen through the necessity of everything and got the whole thing off by heart' (*Journals*, July 1854). He did not deny that the Hegelian system, if viewed purely as an 'experiment in thought', constituted a structure of genius, an intellectual *tour de force*. Nevertheless, thought was not the same as reality, nor could reality be deduced from it; the existential remained obstinately apart, and it was this that ultimately gave the lie to the elaborate scheme Hegel had so ingeniously contrived.

At first sight Kierkegaard might be understood to be simply restating the Kantian claim that from the mere concept or idea of a thing nothing follows concerning its existence. And it is true that in various parts of his work he explicitly endorses this very point: thus, when discussing alleged proofs of God's existence in the third chapter of *Philosophical Fragments*, he maintains that such arguments 'do not prove anything, least of all an existence, but merely develop the content of a conception'. It was, indeed, a key tenet of his philosophy that religious faith is, and must be, independent of all rational demonstration: the notion of proving what necessarily transcends rational knowledge represents the eternal temptation of reason, whilst at the same time being reason's 'undoing'—'the supreme paradox of all thought is the attempt to discover something that thought cannot think'. Hence the Hegelian contention that the essential content and truth of religion had been preserved and given systematic form within the framework of the Idealist metaphysic rested upon an illusion.

Yet neither this objection, nor the previous one concerning the legitimacy of deriving existential conclusions from conceptual premisses, took first place in Kierkegaard's attacks upon the dominant philosophy of his time. When he spoke of existence, it was not primarily in the sense of a general category of logical theory. Rather, specifically *human* existence was what he had in mind, in all its richness and particularity; and he complained that it was a conspicuous flaw in the Hegelian world-picture that it radically distorted and falsified the conception of what it is to live and act as an individual human being. For in essence this picture assumed that it was possible to adopt a God-like

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point of view from which everything could be seen to fall within the scope of a completeable whole; as a result, human nature was reduced to a philosophical abstraction, the individual to a specimen of his kind, and the significance of a man's particular choices and deeds to their role in a historical process that dwarfed and transcended him. To talk in this way was, however, to confuse the 'fantastic shadow-play of pure thought' with the flesh and blood of human reality: moreover, it was to forget that the thinker himself is not a kind of contemplative 'ghost', a bare ego set apart from the world and subsisting *sub specie aeterni*, but a concrete 'existing individual' whose standpoint is necessarily limited by empirical contingencies, who 'sleeps, eats, blows his nose' and who has 'to face the future'. Kierkegaard noted ironically that Hegel, in particular, seemed to overlook this, comparing the impression produced by the latter's *Logic*, accompanied as it was by a 'collection of notes', with what we should feel if a man were to show us a letter 'purporting to have come from heaven, but having a blotter enclosed which only too clearly reveals its mundane origin' (*Postscript*, p. 297).

Such examples of professorial 'absent-mindedness', comic in themselves, were none the less regarded by Kierkegaard as symptomatic of a profound *malaise* that extended far beyond the confines of the academic lecture-room. In his eyes, Hegelianism constituted the ideology *par excellence* of the age in which he lived, an age in which people no longer possessed, or wished to possess, a clear conception of their identity as individuals, tending instead to immerse themselves in the comforting anonymity provided by social groups or movements. 'The more the collective idea comes to dominate even the ordinary consciousness, the more forbidding seems the transition to becoming a particular existing human being instead of losing oneself in the race, and saying "we", "our age", "the nineteenth century"' (*ibid.*, p. 317). Elsewhere, in his striking and prophetic essay *The Present Age*, Kierkegaard discusses the development of the concept of 'the public', a conveniently empty abstraction in which people could submerge themselves, so absolving themselves from personal responsibility for what they thought and did. Behind all these social tendencies lay a common movement towards evasion and escape, a refusal to confront the fact that each man is in the end accountable for his own life and personality and a propensity to take refuge in self-deception and pretence. Modern existentialists would characterize the

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phenomenon in question as a form of 'inauthentic existence', 'bad faith'; but, however described, it was considered by Kierkegaard to be a real and pervasive element in the society of his time, the reflection in practical terms of a fundamental attitude of mind which, at the theoretical level, explained the vogue of Hegel's system. Men had been led, through a too 'assiduous converse with the historical', to dissipate their energies and attention upon what is external, objective, 'accidental'; in so doing, they had lost contact with what is essential—the inner spirit, the ethical, freedom'. The consequence was a numbed mediocrity, an enfeeblement of the will, a loss of passion and conviction, all of which infected thought and behaviour alike.

This was as apparent in the religious sphere as it was in the secular. Established religion as represented by the church—'Christendom'—had become just another insidious device whereby, endowed with a life and purpose of its own, it was thought of as justifying men in the pursuit of ends which were actually opposed to their true interests as human beings. Karl Löwith has drawn attention to the point that there is in general a marked similarity between the terms in which Kierkegaard inveighed against the 'bourgeois-Christian' world and those in which Marx attacked the allegedly sterile society of bourgeois capitalism.<sup>1</sup> An interesting and more specific parallel might also be drawn between Kierkegaard's view of the church as an institution that was ultimately hostile to the Christian values it was supposed to promote, and the influential conceptions of social and economic 'alienation' which Marx was independently evolving at the same time. Despite their vast difference, it is not altogether surprising that the paths of these two thinkers, both reacting against Hegel and yet both still influenced by him, should sometimes have crossed.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, it is easy to forget, when reading Kierkegaard's polemics, how much he himself derived—whether consciously or unconsciously—from the thinker whose doctrines he so violently abjured. Far from neglecting human existence, Hegel in fact offered—in *The Phenomenology of Mind* and

<sup>1</sup> *Von Hegel zu Nietzsche* (1941); trans. David E. Green (1964), p. 161.

<sup>2</sup> Both, too, had read L. Feuerbach's *Das Wesen des Christenthums* (1841), Kierkegaard while writing *Philosophical Fragments*. Many of Kierkegaard's criticisms of Hegelianism in the *Fragments* and the *Postscript* read like an elaboration of Feuerbach's dictum that 'thought proceeds from being, not being from thought'; though he had, of course, no sympathy with Feuerbach's conception of God as man's 'projected image of himself'.

elsewhere—detailed interpretations of characteristically opposed human attitudes and outlooks, and of the differing modes under which men may conceive of their relations to one another and to reality as a whole. The notion of alienation, of man's estrangement from himself, played an important part in this analysis: so, too, did the connected idea that men may come to regard institutions and ideas as autonomous forces, exercising authority independently of the reason and volition of individual human beings. Kierkegaard employed these, and other, Hegelian conceptions; he turned them, however, against the very philosophy that had put them into currency, such a system as the Hegelian being portrayed as one in which the identity of the individual had been dispersed in the universal and all 'existential decisions' treated as 'a mere shadow-play beside what is eternally decided from behind' (*Postscript*, p. 203).

Hence, whilst Kierkegaard was prepared to accept the validity of many of the oppositions Hegel had delineated, he rejected the claim that these must inevitably be overcome and transcended at some higher stage in the unfolding of the Hegelian 'Idea'. Where Hegel had spoken of distinct forms of consciousness, different views of life and the world, succeeding one another according to the requirements of an ineluctable logic to form a necessary rational sequence, Kierkegaard, by contrast, stressed the role of the individual will in effecting a transition between such outlooks. For it was essential, in his eyes, to underline the ultimacy of personal choice, the inescapable responsibility of each individual to decide between alternatives that are in the last analysis irreconcilable.

As its title implies, this is the theme underlying *Either/Or*. In that book Kierkegaard deliberately avoided trying to adopt the standpoint of the remote speculative philosopher, disinterestedly surveying the world from afar. His aim was rather to look inwards, and—by drawing upon the resources of his own direct experience—to present two separate modes of living, two radically divergent attitudes towards existence: he wanted at all costs to show, concretely and from within, what it is to live as a certain kind of person, to entertain certain kinds of desire, to feel the force of certain types of emotion, to conceptualize and evaluate experience in certain ways; as he put it, the views with which he was concerned should be allowed to 'speak for themselves', no attempt being made to arbitrate between them.

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This aspect of Kierkegaard's method is even discernible in the form in which his two imaginary characters are made to set out their ideas. Thus the papers ascribed to A—the aesthetic individual—cover a variety of oddly assorted topics bearing only a very loose relation to one another; they range from romantically toned aphorisms on life (some based on entries Kierkegaard made in his journals during his own 'aesthetic' phase) to reflective essays on tragedy and the erotic (where Mozart's *Don Giovanni* is the main subject), and conclude with a day-by-day account, in the shape of a diary, of a carefully meditated and somewhat ambiguous seduction. The diffuseness and apparent absence of determinate direction or structure in this part of the book may almost be said to mirror difficulties which Kierkegaard believed to be inherent in the whole notion of carrying out a 'single, coherent aesthetic view of life'; it is noteworthy that the only paper included that comes at all close to giving a general characterization of such a view is a brief one called 'The Rotation Method'. On the other hand, the contribution of the ethicist—Judge Wilhelm—is confined to no more than two, admittedly extremely lengthy, letters addressed to A. These are written in a sober, deliberate, at times even stuffy style, and are evidently intended to contrast with the effervescent and rather self-conscious 'brilliance' of the recipient: A is, indeed, explicitly referred to as being the cleverer of the two. It is, however, in the Judge's second letter—the 'Equilibrium'—that the clearest intimations are given of the nature of the comparison Kierkegaard was making, and also of the significance he accorded it.

The position of the Judge is in fact a curious one, and critics have sometimes drawn attention to its problematic character. It is arguable, for instance, that—despite Kierkegaard's claim that 'there is no didacticism in the book' (*Postscript*, p. 228)—he does not really restrict himself to putting forward two distinct attitudes to life, the question of which is finally to be preferred being left open as something that each individual must decide for himself. It is not just that the ethicist is given the second, and therefore the last word: Kierkegaard also strongly implies that the Judge has, in some fundamental sense, seen through A's attitude; he grasps its motivation and is thereby enabled to criticize the aesthetic approach in a way that undermines it. Admittedly Kierkegaard, as the author, does not explicitly *tell* the reader from the sidelines what is wrong with A's standpoint: to this extent he is faithful to his

notion of 'indirect communication', which was to 'abstain from dogmatizing' and to try instead to lead the reader to understand for himself—in 'inwardness'—the issues about which he had to make up his mind. All the same, even a cursory perusal of the book leaves little doubt as to the conclusion we are meant to draw, the Judge's ideas being expressed in a manner that would seem to indicate the evident superiority of the ethical outlook. In this respect it may be urged that Kierkegaard's case is essentially similar to that of other philosophers (like, e.g., F. H. Bradley) who, from an already 'committed' viewpoint, none the less professed to be concerned solely with elucidating the moral consciousness, and not with making recommendations.

Such objections do, I think, point to an element of ambiguity in *Either/Or*; one that no doubt stems in part from the book's being, in inspiration at least, a highly personal document intimately connected with Kierkegaard's own moral and religious development, but perhaps also from the ultimate ambivalence of his reaction to Hegel. But let us set aside this question for the moment and look first at some of the things he makes the Judge say.

What did Kierkegaard wish to convey when he used the terms 'aesthetic' and 'ethical' to distinguish opposed views of life? Certain familiar divisions and contrasts are evoked by a number of the Judge's remarks: hedonism and conventional morality, for instance, or the Kantian distinction between inclination and duty. But 'Equilibrium' is a rich and involved piece of writing, in which a multitude of ideas are often confusingly thrown together; consequently such crude categories provide at best a very inadequate guide to what he had in mind. Thus although, early on in the Judge's letter, the main interest and object of the aesthetic mode of life is said to consist in enjoyment, it quickly becomes apparent that this is by no means a complete or exhaustive characterization. 'Aestheticism' (in Kierkegaard's sense) can take on different guises: it expresses itself at different stages of sophistication and self-consciousness, and what lies beneath its various manifestations turns out to be far more complex than a mere pursuit of pleasure for pleasure's sake; indeed, what is said about it is often more reminiscent of the type of nineteenth-century Romantic hero discussed by Camus in *L'Homme Révolté* than of the rather philistine hedonist of standard philosophical literature. Similarly with the 'ethical': here there is certainly talk of the importance of recognizing duties and obligations; but we should

misconstrue Kierkegaard's meaning if we supposed that the scrupulous observance of socially accepted rules, or even a Kantian respect for the moral law, represented his sole or central concern. Not only (as we shall see) is the truth more intricate and difficult than these simple interpretations would suggest; it also has interesting points of contact with other, more general, aspects of Kierkegaard's position.

Consider, for a start, the case of the aesthetic individual. As the Judge proceeds, it becomes clear that the condition of such a man (at certain levels at least) is regarded by him as a pathological one, and this for various reasons. Of these, two in particular stand out and can be seen to be connected.

In the first place it is suggested, from a number of different directions, that there are important respects in which the man who lives aesthetically is not really *in control*, either of himself or his situation. Thus he typically exists *ins Blaue hinein*; he tends to live 'for the moment', for what the passing instant will bring in the way of entertainment, excitement, interest. Committed to nothing permanent or definite, dispersed in 'immediacy', he may do or think one thing at a given time, the exact opposite at some other; his life is therefore without 'continuity', lacks stability or a 'centre', changes course according to mood or circumstance, is 'like a witch's letter from which one sense can be got now and then another, depending on how one turns it' (*Either/Or*, ii, p. 263). Even so, it should not be inferred that such a man is always or necessarily governed by mere impulse—on the contrary, he may be reflective and calculating, like the seducer whose diary is included amongst A's papers. If, however, he does adopt long-term goals or decide to follow certain maxims, it is in a purely 'experimental' spirit. That is to say, he will continue only for so long as the idea appeals to him, the alternative of giving up if he gets tired or bored, or if some more attractive prospect offers itself, remaining forever open; such 'gymnastic experimentation' in the practical sphere may be regarded, in fact, as the analogue of sophistry in the theoretical (*ibid.*, p. 257). For, whatever the variations, life is still envisaged in terms of possibilities that may be contemplated and savoured, not of projects to be fulfilled or tasks to be done.

All this has wider implications from the present point of view. In the last resort, 'he who lives aesthetically expects everything from without'; his basically passive attitude to the world is at the same time a kind of surrender, in that it involves his subjecting himself to conditions whose fulfilment is finally

determined by factors that are independent of his will. Such dependence upon the contingent, upon the 'accidental', upon what happens in the world or in the natural course of events, may assume a wide variety of forms. Sometimes it is reliance upon 'external' conditions, like possessions or power or even the prized love of another human being; but it may also involve something that is intrinsic to the individual himself, such as physical beauty. The point is that, in every instance of this kind, the person is ultimately placed in the power of 'what may be or may not be'; his mode of life is tied to things that are, in the nature of the case, uncertain or perishable, and no volition on his part can ever guarantee their attainment or preservation, or even his continued enjoyment of them if he has them. If they fail him—and this will in the end be a matter of luck or fortune—it may seem that the very foundation of his existence has been removed; he will feel (temporarily at least) that he has been deprived of what made life worth living. As Kierkegaard expressed it elsewhere, in such a view the self is put 'in the dative case, like the child when it says "me" for "I"'.<sup>1</sup>

Here, then, is one element in the Judge's diagnosis of aestheticism, leading him to speak of the individual as 'enmeshed', his manner of life bound (whether he knows it or not) to what is transitory or beyond his control. This notion of 'dependence upon the object' is a recurrent one in existentialist literature; Simone de Beauvoir, for example, refers to it when, describing the condition of what she calls 'l'homme sérieux', she writes that 'everything is a threat to him, since the thing which he has set up as an idol is an externality and is thus in relationship with the whole universe', and goes on to assert that, because 'he will never be master of this exterior world to which he has consented to submit, he will be constantly upset by the uncontrollable course of events'.<sup>2</sup> Such descriptions may appear far-fetched, and to be, at best, exaggerations based upon extreme situations and experiences involving (say) obsessional or compulsive passions and fears. Thus it may be contended that things are different when we move from the sphere of obsession to that in which more normal forms of desire have their place. For here it would surely be curious to talk of servitude, or to describe people as having (whether in their own eyes or those of others) put themselves at the mercy of circumstances.

But where is the line to be drawn? It was at least part of

<sup>1</sup> *The Sickness unto Death*, pp. 80-1.

<sup>2</sup> *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. B. Frechtman, p. 51.

Kierkegaard's position that any attempt to draw a line within the realm of the aesthetic consciousness could result only in some quite arbitrary division. It is the mark of the aesthetic individual that he does not seek to impose a coherent pattern upon his life, having its source in some unitary notion of himself and of what he should be, but rather allows 'what happens'—both within and without him—to act upon him and to govern his behaviour. True inward reflection shows this to be so, and when such reflection occurs it is liable to produce an acute and pervasive sense of despair in the person concerned; his entire life—in general and not merely in particular—will be seen to rest upon an impossible, because uncertain, basis and, as such, appear drained of meaning. This, however, leads to a further, extremely important, development of the aesthetic position and one about which the Judge has much to say.

For it is now claimed that such self-awareness may be wholly repressed or ignored, or at any rate that its true significance and consequences for the individual may be subtly evaded. Absolute or metaphysical despair about one's life and its foundation is, in fact, a necessity if one is to recognize that another 'higher' form of existence is 'an imperative requirement' (*Either/Or*, ii, p. 197); yet it is precisely this crucial step in the direction of the ethical that the aesthetic individual is unwilling to take. He remains at root too deeply committed to his own mode of life and thought to attempt to liberate himself from it, and therefore seeks instead, by a variety of devices and stratagems, to keep the truth at a distance, to prevent it from impinging upon him. As an illustration of what this can mean, the Judge rather unexpectedly selects the career of Nero. Nero, he suggests, provides an alarming and fearful example of how a man may try to hold back the truth about himself by plunging into a restless life of sensuality and terrorism, though in a way that affords him no real peace or satisfaction—'the spirit within him gathers like a dark cloud, its wrath broods over his soul, and it becomes an anguishing dread . . .' (*ibid.*, p. 190). Thus he becomes the prey to a mysterious objectless melancholy (*Tungsind*): repression, for Kierkegaard as for Freud, exacts its own revenge.

But is Nero not an exceptional case? The Judge's answer is that, whether we care to admit it or not, Nero was 'flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone'; the phenomenon being discussed can take numberless forms, and finds as effective expression in the life of a 'respectable' man of affairs, going soberly and

prudently about his business, as in that of a monstrous tyrant. The important thing is to uncover the hidden motivation, to show how the aesthetic consciousness strives to reassert itself at the very point at which a person acquires sufficient self-awareness for the transformation of his outlook and personality to become a genuine possibility. As has been seen, this sometimes happens through a man's trying to obliterate his inner understanding by various kinds of activity; but it can also take a more subtle and insidious shape. For there is what Kierkegaard once called a 'dialectical interplay of knowledge and will' which may make it hard to determine whether a person is consciously trying to distract himself from a predicament he knows (however obscurely) to be his, or whether, on the other hand, he has so interpreted his condition as to make it appear to preclude the whole notion of fundamental choice or change. And the second of these things may be uppermost.

Thus, by a strange reversal of the aesthetic position, a man may come to treat sorrow, not pleasure, as 'the meaning of his life', taking a perverse satisfaction in the thought that this at least is something of which he cannot be deprived. For he may regard it as a state to which he is doomed, fated; what he is and feels, how he stands—these all follow from the nature of things. He may, for instance, ascribe his unhappiness to something fixed and unalterable in his character or in his environment—he has a 'sad disposition', or he has been treated badly by other people. Or it may be that he thinks of himself under grandiloquent labels which somehow determine his place and destiny in the world—e.g. 'the unfortunate individual', 'the tragic hero'. Again, and more generally, he may take refuge in a Romantic *Weltschmerz*, using the tone of disillusioned pessimism and treating questions of practical decision as if they could be of no final significance—whatever a man does he will end by regretting. In all such ideas it is possible to find a spurious tranquillity; one can, indeed, even take a certain quiet pride in them. Nor is this surprising. For their eventual issue is 'an out and out fatalism, which always has something seductive about it' (*ibid.*, p. 241): by accepting a fatalistic or necessitarian viewpoint the individual tacitly absolves himself from all accountability for his condition, as well as from the obligation to do anything about it. Yet in the end this is never more than a pretence, a cover, behind which the man conceals his unavowed determination to remain at a stage wherefrom he could, if he chose, liberate himself.

It is impossible in a short space to separate out more than a few themes from the extraordinarily elaborate and stratified analysis of aestheticism that Kierkegaard provides. It was both his strength and his weakness as a thinker that he employed certain key concepts in an extremely elastic way; this often enabled him to exhibit hitherto unsuspected connections between apparently quite diverse psychological phenomena, but it also led him to give his categories so wide an application that their very significance seems sometimes to be in jeopardy. Thus there are moments when a reader of 'Equilibrium' may wonder whether there is anything at all that could not, with a little ingenuity, be construed as an instance of 'living aesthetically'. His interpretation of the text is, moreover, liable to be complicated by a further factor. For it is not always clear when Kierkegaard is speaking of the aesthetic consciousness in a wholly general way and when, on the other hand, he is referring to some particular manifestation of it that was of special relevance to his own age and culture. There can, however, be no doubt that he supposed much of what he had to say to bear closely upon contemporary trends of thought and feeling. For instance, at one point it is explicitly affirmed that aesthetic 'melancholy', the failure 'to will deeply and sincerely', is a sickness under which 'all young Germany and France now sighs' (*ibid.*, p. 193). There are also many discernible parallels between the Judge's characterization of some typical aesthetic attitudes and Kierkegaard's later criticisms of current Hegelianism and its influence: absorption in the 'outward', the external; absence or loss of a sense of individual identity and responsibility; substitution of abstract thinking and speculation for personal conviction and serious practical commitment; complacent acquiescence in deterministic or historicist myths; a pervasive cult of indifference. Concerning the last, indeed, the Judge specifically compares the aesthetic preparedness to treat every choice between alternatives as a matter of no ultimate consequence with 'the pet theory of the newer philosophy, that the principle of contradiction is annulled' (*ibid.*, p. 174). Altogether, the suggestion that Hegelianism can be regarded as aestheticism (in certain of its forms) raised to the level of theoretical reflection is too insistent to be ignored, giving added depth to Kierkegaard's contention that he had a polemical purpose in writing *Either/Or*.

Yet here we may return to a point touched upon earlier. For the book also, I think, illustrates the equivocal character of

Kierkegaard's revolt against Hegel and against speculative philosophy in general. There exists an understandable tendency, encouraged by much that he himself said as well as by the pronouncements of later existentialist writers, to think of him as being, above all else, a protagonist of pure unalloyed choice and of ineliminable freedom: on one side, he is pictured as the relentless critic of attempts to derive, from allegedly rational or 'scientific' insights into the nature of objective reality, ready-made solutions to the problems of living; on the other, he is seen as a champion of authenticity, subjective 'inwardness', absolute self-commitment involving an inescapable element of risk. In so far as they stress Kierkegaard's importance as a source of ideas that have since gained wide currency, such views have obvious force. For instance, in emphasizing the degree to which men may be ultimately accountable, not merely for their actions, but also for those constellations of beliefs, attitudes, and desires that make up their general outlooks on the world, he plainly anticipated a type of interpretation which Sartre, in particular, has developed and exploited to great effect. And Kierkegaard's discussions of the ways in which, by evasion, compromise, and self-deception, people may try to slough off individual responsibility and the burden of decision constitute a revealing and permanent contribution to the understanding of human behaviour in the moral sphere. Here, as in other respects, he has his place as a genuine innovator, outside the main stream of nineteenth-century thought. Even so, this was not the whole story, as the treatment of ethical matters in 'Equilibrium' helps to indicate.

Kierkegaard certainly insisted that it was up to the individual whether he remained within the aesthetic stage or transferred himself to the ethical. There is nothing in the nature of things that can force a man to make this transition, just as—at a different level—there is nothing that compels him to leave the ethical sphere for the religious. In this sense, at least, the notion of choice plays a fundamental and irreducible role. None the less, it is important to remember that Kierkegaard's employment of it is circumscribed by a number of considerations.

Thus it is implicit in his general approach that the three stages he mentions represent a recognizably dialectical progression. Crises occur in the aesthetic consciousness which at any rate *call for* the adoption of a new form of life, even if this is not in fact how the individual himself undertakes to resolve

them: as the Judge remarks, in terms strikingly reminiscent of Hegel, there 'comes a moment in a man's life when his immediacy is, as it were, ripened and the spirit demands a higher form in which it will apprehend itself as spirit' (*ibid.*, p. 193). Moreover, specific reasons can be given to the aestheticist showing why it would be better for him to make the change, even from his own aesthetic point of view: '... the ethical, in the regions which border on the aesthetical, is so far from depriving life of its beauty that it bestows beauty upon it' (*ibid.*, p. 328). The ethical, in other words, does not 'annihilate the aesthetical' but 'transfigures it', preserving and enhancing what is valuable in it—again, a typically Hegelian conception which consorts oddly with what Kierkegaard has to say in general about 'mediation'. Nor would it be plausible to understand him as suggesting that the 'higher form' embodied in the ethical life is something which each man is at liberty to interpret according to his own private tastes or preferences. For he frequently implies, in a number of different contexts, that views according to which men may freely choose or invent for themselves their principles of conduct are a species of 'experimentalism'; such conceptions, typical of certain kinds of Romanticism, rest everything upon the arbitrary will of the individual and rightfully belong to the aesthetic, not the ethical, domain. The fundamental categories of the ethical are 'good and evil' and 'duty', and Kierkegaard often writes as if these had a universal meaning, recognizable by all who use them. Here, however, he might seem to be faced with a difficulty connected with the general account he provides of the ethical life.

For Kierkegaard's picture of such a life is itself one that is deliberately, almost defiantly, focused on the individual. Personality is the 'absolute', is 'its own end and purpose'; and in describing the emergence and development of the ethical character he treats as basic the notion of 'choosing oneself', together with the closely associated ideas of self-knowledge, self-acceptance, self-realization. The ethical individual is portrayed as one who regards himself as a 'goal', a 'task set'; unlike the aestheticist, who is continually preoccupied by externals, his attention is directed towards his own nature, his concrete reality as a person with such and such talents, inclinations, and habits, this being something which it lies within his capacity to order, control, and cultivate. There is thus a sense in which he can be said, knowingly and willingly, to take responsibility for

himself; he does not, as the aestheticist is prone to do, treat his personal traits and dispositions as a kind of necessary fact of nature to which he must merely submit, but regards them rather as a challenge—his self-knowledge is not 'a mere contemplation' but a 'reflection upon himself which itself is an action' (*ibid.*, p. 263). Moreover, by such inward understanding and self-exploration a man comes to recognize, not only what he empirically is, but what he truly aspires to become; thus the Judge can speak of an 'ideal self' which is 'the picture in likeness to which he has to form himself'. In this way, the ethical individual's life and behaviour come to be infused and directed by a determinate conception of himself which is securely founded in the depths of his own inner nature and which is immune to the vicissitudes of accident or fortune. He is not, as the aestheticist was shown to be, the prey of what happens or befalls, for he has not surrendered himself to the governance of outside circumstances and incalculable contingencies. Nor, from the point of view he adopts, can success or failure be measured by whether or not his projects in fact find fulfilment in the world. What finally matters is his total identification of himself with these projects; it is the spirit in which things are done, the energy and sincerity with which they are undertaken and pursued, that are chiefly emphasized—not the observable consequences of the actions performed.

Much in all this strikes a familiar chord, appearing (though with significant variations) as an extension of classical doctrines of self-determination that reach back to the Stoics and beyond. There is much, too, which, while defying brief summary, finds a response in the ordinary moral consciousness and seems to silhouette features of moral psychology that are too often neglected in standard works on ethics. Even so, such an account may appear inadequate as it stands, if only because, as presented, it interprets the ethical life in a way that pays no attention to its content. For it is arguable that a person who lives such a life must also be understood to acknowledge certain norms and values which he regards as holding for others as well as for himself and which, furthermore, are assumed to find a considerable degree of common recognition and acceptance. It was this, or something like it, that Kierkegaard may be presumed to have had in mind when he makes the Judge say that the ethical individual 'expresses the universal in his life': certainly he speaks as if such things as work, marriage, the fulfilment of civic or social responsibilities, and so forth were intrinsic to

ethical existence as properly conceived. But how is this to be reconciled with the individualistic claims previously advanced? For in those it was suggested that a man's values ultimately had their source in himself alone: if, on the other hand, he accepts that there exist socially recognized duties to which he is necessarily subject or by which he is objectively bound, will this not imply a renunciation of his essential independence and place him once more in a relation of subjugation to the external?

Here, again, we have the elements of a situation to which modern existentialists have drawn attention. Sartre, for example, has written of the danger of treating moral values as 'transcendent givens independent of human subjectivity', and has condemned the *mauvaise foi* inherent in the attitude of the man who 'makes himself such that he is *waited for* by all the tasks placed upon his way'.<sup>1</sup> Kierkegaard was, in fact, well aware of the kind of approach referred to, giving instances that closely conform to the Sartrean pattern. Thus he mentions the case of people who are oppressed to the point of distraction by the feeling that there lies before them an unending string of particular obligations and duties, perpetually requiring attention; these are looked on rather as a child might view the edicts of a parent or schoolmaster, and are seen as commands, 'impositions'. It was none the less his contention that this whole outlook represented a radical perversion of the truth, being itself tainted with the aesthetical and involving self-concealment—the man shows reluctance 'to become transparent to himself'. The ethical is not an external authority, something to be envisaged as essentially 'foreign to the personality': on the contrary, it is necessary that it should be experienced as internal to the agent; it springs, or 'breaks forth', from within the individual, and is 'the expression of his inmost nature' (*ibid.*, p. 259). One might, therefore, be inclined to argue that Kierkegaard—at any rate when he wrote *Either/Or*—subscribed to the view that there exists some universal or essential human character which is potentially present in all of us and which we are in some sense called upon to realize in our lives. For this would enable him to close the gap that threatens to open within his theory; he could now claim that the shared norms and objectively conceived values inherent in the general notion of the ethical have their final ground and explanation in an inner nature that is common to every human being.

How far is such an account of Kierkegaard's meaning really

<sup>1</sup> *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes, p. 626.

acceptable? The tensions in his writing are not easily resolved, and whatever virtues of tidiness or consistency the suggested interpretation may possess, it is by no means borne out by everything he says. For one thing, he often—as we have seen—appears to be chiefly concerned with exhibiting the pervasive quality and inward texture of the ethical life, rather than with eliciting those particular standards or interests that might be presumed to govern its outward direction; it is not so much what sorts of thing a man does that is central here, as how he approaches what he does and how he envisages it within the context of his existence as a whole. For another, the idea that the individual has to find his own path, through a process of patient and painful self-understanding, goes very deep in Kierkegaard's thought, emerging in what the Judge says towards the end of his letter about the difficulties certain 'exceptional' individuals may encounter in trying to realize the ethical universal in their lives (he clearly has in mind his own broken engagement with Regine Olsen). From this point of view alone, the notion of providing a definitive diagram of human nature, in the bland 'essentialist' style of much traditional philosophy, is one that runs counter to what gives to his writing in general its distinctive and arresting character. Comforting rationalizations of experience, reassuring generalities obscuring what 'it means for you and me and him, each for himself, to be human beings'—these were not things he typically sought to offer. Instead, his work, like his life, was above all 'calculated to make people aware', and in trying to do so he employed to the full his considerable talent for exposing the anodynes whereby men dull their wills and sensibilities, the masks and disguises they use to hide from others and from themselves. Yet his very exercise of that talent may seem, in retrospect, to have raised problems of its own; and even in 'Equilibrium', behind the Judge's measured paragraphs, one already discerns the outline of a dilemma which, in various different forms, has tended to haunt Kierkegaard's existentialist successors. For it is not hard to reach a position from which every attempt to subscribe to a system of social behaviour involving the observance of general rules can appear open to contamination by insincerity, inauthenticity, 'complicity'; as he himself put it, even to be honest in such a way that the world regards one as honest can be a form of dishonesty. It is not perhaps surprising that, in Kierkegaard's case, salvation ultimately presented itself in the shape of a personal Christian

faith that transcended the ethical domain; a faith, moreover, that was so lonely, concentrated and austere as to make the question of its practical implications for everyday living in society seem almost, at times, an irrelevance.

It has not, however, been my intention to discuss, let alone try to interpret, Kierkegaard's highly individual conception of religion; more specifically, I have not wished to examine the considerations that subsequently led him, in books such as *Fear and Trembling*, to emphasize the distinction between the religious and the ethical spheres and to suggest that it was not to the latter that questions concerning the ultimate ends and significance of human existence finally belonged. It is true that, without such an examination, any account of Kierkegaard's ethics as a whole must necessarily remain inadequate and incomplete. Yet, by concentrating upon a work that is mainly concerned to contrast, not the ethical with the religious, but the ethical with what he chose to call the aesthetic, it may have been possible to highlight a persistent feature of his thinking that is not, I suspect, without relevance to the situation confronting moral philosophy at the present time. At times, especially when he is seeking to distinguish ethical commitment from aesthetic 'experimentation', Kierkegaard appears anxious to exclude from the moral sphere anything savouring of the subjective or arbitrary and to insist instead upon the authoritative and universal claims which morality of its essence imposes. At others, by contrast, the individualistic strain—so evident in other departments of his thought—seems to reassert itself in the form of a rejection of impersonally conceived moral codes or standards; here it is depth of conviction, an inner honesty and truth to oneself, that is given precedence as the fundamental determinant of the moral consciousness and as the final touchstone of value. Admittedly, given his tendency to stress the inward quality, the characteristic temper and tone, of the moral point of view rather than its overt expression in action and conduct, what he says invites comparison with approaches more naturally associated with continental than with Anglo-Saxon thinkers. But it should not therefore be assumed that it is only in the writings of recent existentialists that the kind of ambivalence noticeable at certain stages of his argument finds a contemporary echo. For it may also, I suggest, be detected (though in a more muted form) beneath some of the controversies that have engaged their British counterparts concerning the status and logical character of moral judgements. One might

cite, in particular, the disputes that have centred upon the question of whether the criteria for the application of moral concepts presuppose agreed or established standards of evaluation that are, so to speak, incapsulated within the vocabulary we employ, or whether, on the other hand, the determination of such criteria must in the last analysis be regarded as a matter of personal choice and judgement, the unavoidable responsibility of each individual alone. Such debates have often seemed to be endowed with a curiously inconclusive quality that makes it permissible to wonder whether this may not be due, in part at least, to their reflecting unacknowledged tensions inherent in the very framework within which our everyday thinking about morals is set. Should this indeed be the case one could regard Kierkegaard's treatment of ethics in *Either/Or* as dramatizing a conflict lying at the heart, not only of his own conception of morality, but of ours as well.