

DIALECTIC AND EXISTENCE IN KIERKEGAARD AND KANT*

Nythamar Fernandes de Oliveira**

*À la mémoire des professeurs
Jean Brun (Dijon/Aix-en-Provence)
Robert D. Knudsen (Philadelphia)*

ABSTRACT – This article seeks to examine to what extent Kierkegaard's moral philosophy draws on Kant's critique of dialectical reason. It is shown that Kant's refutation of the ontological proof of God means a departure from objective uncertainty towards practical certainty, while Kierkegaard's dialectic of existence allows for truth to be regarded as being both personal and objective. Whether Kierkegaard's conception of existence cannot be separated from the Absolute Paradox or whether it does not at all presuppose God's revelation seems to guide a pre-understanding of the Lutheran-inspired opposition between faith and reason which haunts both Kant's and Kierkegaard's view of human nature vis à vis the Wholly Other.

KEY WORDS – Dialectics. Ethics. Existence. Faith and reason. Metaphysics. Objectivity. Philosophical anthropology. Religion. Subjectivity.

SÍNTESE – Este artigo procura examinar em que medida a filosofia moral de Kierkegaard se apóia na crítica kantiana da razão dialética. Mostra-se que a rejeição kantiana da prova ontológica da existência de Deus significa um afastamento da incerteza objetiva em direção à certeza prática, enquanto a dialética kierkegaardiana da existência permite que a verdade seja tomada como sendo tanto pessoal quanto objetiva. Se a concepção kierkegaardiana de existência não pode ser separada do Paradoxo Absoluto ou se nem sequer pressupõe a revelação divina parece guiar uma pré-compreensão da oposição luterana entre fé e razão que persiste nas concepções de natureza humana em Kant e Kierkegaard, com relação ao Todo-Outro.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE – Antropologia filosófica. Dialética. Ética. Existência. Fé e razão. Metafísica. Objetividade. Religião. Subjetividade.

Introduction

Like Immanuel Kant, Søren Kierkegaard has definitely contributed to the vast field of philosophy of religion with a seminal conception of what means to believe

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in God, and in particular with a highly original interpretation of Christianity and Christian theology. Unlike Kant, however, Kierkegaard does propose an account of what a genuine Christian faith should be like, beyond a culturally-reducible Christendom comprising most people that claim to be Christian: not so much a question of *being* a Christian, but rather of *becoming* one. Like Kant, Kierkegaard draws a distinction between what means to exist and how our human existence may be said to relate to God's. In contrast with Kant's, though, Kierkegaard's critique of religion cannot be separated from his literary style and his own existential thought-experiments with writing. If Kant's greatness in philosophy is inevitably bound to the formal, systematic rigor of his three *Critiques*, Kierkegaard's original contribution to what has become known as existentialism and post-modern thought cannot do away with its religious roots. While existence and religion play an important role in Kant's philosophy, they cannot be said to constitute the very kernel of thinking the meaning of being and reality overall as it is the case with Kierkegaard's dialectic. Just as German idealism must always refer – directly or indirectly – to Kant's transcendental analytic, one cannot reconstitute or recast an existentialist approach to reality without alluding somehow to Kierkegaard's dialectic. Both Kant and Kierkegaard may correctly be regarded as belonging to a transcendental idealist tradition according to which one cannot simply start from empirical data as though reality were “out there”, given once and for all to be discovered, known, and acted upon by independent minds and bodies. And yet, it is my contention here that, for Kierkegaard, such an “anti-realism” not only points to the epistemic structure of a transcendental subjectivity as a starting-point, following Kant's critique of rationalism and empiricism, but also undermines its validity claims insofar as subjectivity qua existence cannot be fully, rationally conceived of in self-referential terms, i.e. its self-referentiality solicits the other of reason. Kierkegaard resorts thus to existence precisely in order to transcend a supposedly immanentist conceptual analysis, so as to implode philosophical undertakings as such. Hence Kierkegaard's approach to the problem of existence begins with the Kantian assumption that human finitude cannot ask reason to account for a realm that is not causally conditioned in time and space. Just as Kant's dialectic shows the impossibility of proving that there is a God, reason can still conceive of the unconditioned even without having knowledge of it: it is ultimately a question of shifting toward a use of reason which is other than the theoretical one. Kierkegaard's dialectical, existential understanding of faith seems to converge on Kant's critique of the dialectic of reason in theoretical terms, eliciting a practical idea whenever dealing with the traditional objects of metaphysics. Like Kant's, Kierkegaard's anti-realism rejects both naive realism (what some would call “external realism” nowadays) and psychological idealism (“subjectivism”). Unlike Kant, however, Kierkegaard vindicates a philosophical discourse, even in its peculiar negative, self-overcoming undertones, to think in grand style what cannot be thought, namely, the forbidden fruit of metaphysical desire, or, in Kantian terminology, a dialectic of the unknown. To quote from Kierkegaard's *Philosophiske Smuler*:

“But what is this unknown something with which the Reason collides when inspired by its paradoxical passion, with the result of unsettling even man’s knowledge of himself? It is the Unknown. It is not a human being, insofar as we know what man is; nor is it any other known thing. So let us call this unknown something: *the God [Guden]*. It is nothing more than a name we assign to it. The idea of demonstrating that this unknown something (the God) exists, could scarcely suggest itself to the Reason. For if the God does not exist it would of course be impossible to prove it; and if does exist it would be folly to attempt it” (PF 49).¹

Although I do not have any pretension to exploring here Kierkegaard’s and Kant’s complex philosophies of religion, I must signal that their respective accounts of dialectics and existence not only refer us to some of the main problems at issue (such as the nature of God, faith, and knowledge) but also translate the motifs and concerns of their philosophizing in general. To my mind, even though one cannot reduce the question of religion to any category such as sacrifice, the sacred, the other, the absolute ground of being, and so forth, one may well sustain – in reasonable, rational terms – that there is no religion without God, gods or a sense, intuition or an idea of the divine – beyond both theistic and deistic variants. Moreover, by all accounts, most religions embrace what may be termed a realistic view of God’s existence – that God does exist is simply an unproblematic starting-point, even if such an assumption is not conceived in theistic or deistic terms. Both Kant and Kierkegaard agree on identifying the philosophical attitude with a critical problematizing of whatever seems to be given. While theology deals with mysteries and their confessional formulations, philosophy has to do with problems, the positing of *problemata* and their conceptual working. Philosophical theology must thus be understood, on the one hand, as a branch of metaphysics – to employ the terminology at vogue in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries –, more precisely, as a theoretical discipline. On the other hand, Kierkegaard draws on Kant’s practical shift in the critique of dogmatic metaphysics as they both provide us with an overcoming of theism and deism in their practical approach to the philosophical problem of God. In this sense, one may say that both Kant and Kierkegaard conceive of religion in practical-theoretical terms, that is, both as a philosophical-theological and as a practical-philosophical object of inquiry. Eckart Förster and Allen Wood have convincingly shown that Kant’s philosophy of religion and his conception of God have undergone many modifications from the 1770 Inaugural Dissertation through the three Critiques and the later writings on religion.² There is, however, one thing that remains unchanged in Kant’s views on religion and faith, namely, that

¹ I am using the following abbreviations of Kierkegaard’s works translated into English: FT = *Fear and Trembling/Repetition* (trans. H. Hong and E. Hong; Princeton University Press, 1983); CUP = *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (trans. D. Swenson and W. Lowrie; Princeton U.P., 1968); PF = *Philosophical Fragments* (trans. H. Hong; Princeton U.P., 1967); SUD = *Sickness Unto Death* (trans. H. Hong and E. Hong; Princeton U.P., 1980).

² Cf. Eckart Förster, “Die Wandlungen in Kants Gotteslehre”, *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung* 52/3 (1998); “As mundações no conceito kantiano de Deus,” *Studia Kantiana* 1 (1998); Allen Wood, *Kant’s Moral Religion* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1970).

practical reason prevails over the failing attempts of dialectical reason to sustain a coherent theoretical proof for God's existence. In the KrV (A 631ff., B 659 ff.),³ Kant shows the aporias of both natural-theistic and transcendental-deistic approaches to theology as they respectively represent the supreme being as cause and Author of the world. According to Kant, seeing that theism admits the deistic transcendental ontotheology plus a natural theology, all theistic proofs can be divided into three general types – ontological, cosmological, and physicotheological – and that because the first one cannot be held, the other two are equally flawed (A 583ff., B 611ff.) The Kantian argument against the ontological proof of the existence of God (KrV A 592-602, B 620-630) is thus summed up: “Being’ is obviously not a real predicate, that is, it is not a concept of something which could be added to the concept of a thing... If, now, we take the subject (God) with all its predicates (among which is omnipotence), and say ‘God is,’ or ‘There is a God,’ we attach no new predicate to the concept of God...” Kant’s main contention is that one cannot theoretically justify her faith by arguing that there is a God or that Christianity (or any other religion) is true, but one can reasonably argue for a moral faith, making religion thus dependable on morality and substituting moral for rational theology. As we can read from his *Lectures on Philosophical Theology*:

“Our moral faith is a practical postulate, in that anyone who denies it is brought *ad absurdum practicum*. An *absurdum logicum* is an absurdity in judgments; but there is an *absurdum practicum* when it is shown that anyone who denies this or that would have to be a scoundrel. And this is the case with moral faith. [...] Hence our faith is not scientific knowledge, and thank heaven it is not! For God’s wisdom is apparent in the very fact that we do not *know* that God exists, but should *believe* that God exists.”⁴

If it was Kant indeed who introduced the terms *Dialektik*, *Existenz*, and *Dasein* in modern clothing it was also to him that, as Ronald Green’s meticulous study has shown, a “hidden debt” is owed by the Danish thinker.⁵ Besides Kierkegaard’s explicit usage of Kantian terms and conceptions, the former’s not at all unproblematic opposition to Hegel’s speculative idealism – even if one concludes that such a critique must be extended to Kant himself – reveals an indebtedness to the Königsberger’s moral conception of religion and his critique of dogmatic metaphysics. It has been my assumption here that Kierkegaard’s conception of the divine Eternal as over human existence indeed refers us back to Kant’s critique of dialectical reason, particularly in the refusal of the ontological proof for God’s existence. In this sense I tend to agree with Green that perhaps “the debt to Kant is hidden because Kierkegaard wanted it to be.”(p. xviii) As over against Green’s thesis, others still prefer to follow Alasdair MacIntyre and place

³ I am using Norman Kemp Smith’s translation of Kant’s *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, hereafter KrV.

⁴ English trans. of Kant’s *Vorlesungen über die philosophische Religionslehre*, by A. Wood and G.M. Clark (Ithaca: Cornell, 1978), p. 122 f.

⁵ R. Green, *Kierkegaard and Kant: The Hidden Debt* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992).

Kierkegaard's ethics within the post-eudaimonistic, post-Aristotelian communitarianism of competing traditions.⁶ To be sure, the originality of Kierkegaard's dialectic goes beyond Kant (and Hegel) as it lies in his theological-philosophical attempt to reinterpret Christianity as the ultimate response to the existential question, "How far does the Truth admit of being learned?" (PF 11) With this Platonic question – which to a certain extent may also be said to guide Kant's own recasting of the Socratic self-quest as "what can I know?" –, Kierkegaard has set Christianity over against both philosophical realism and idealism as it seeks to revisit previous conceptions of human nature and the possibility of knowledge. Like Kant's later reformulation of the threefold questioning in the Transcendental Dialectic (in his *Vorlesungen* on Logic), any critique of knowledge will lead us back to the question of philosophical anthropology, "*Was ist der Mensch?*" Notwithstanding, Kierkegaard's philosophy of man deals with the problem of transcendental subjectivity from a different standpoint, which turns out to be existential, marking then a dialectical shift from a transcendental-idealistic toward an existentialist anthropology. Whether Kierkegaard's conception of existence cannot be separated from the Absolute Paradox or whether it does not at all presuppose God's revelation seems to guide a pre-understanding of the Lutheran-inspired opposition between faith and reason which haunts both Kant's and Kierkegaard's view of human nature *vis à vis* the Wholly Other.

1 A Dialectical Existence

There is no doubt as to the existential-dialectical character of Søren Kierkegaard's works, even though such an apparently obvious statement deserves a careful qualification, especially as one takes into account his radical opposition to the Hegelian conception of dialectics, contrasting with its original formulation, say, in Heraclitus, Socrates, and Plato.⁷ In effect, the term "dialectic" appears several times throughout Kierkegaard's publications and posthumously published writings. One of the main problems in studying the Kierkegaardian dialectic arises when one tries to articulate it with his correlative conception of philosophy and theology. For to what extent can one speak of a Kierkegaardian philosophy? How is one to reconstruct a theology which claims to be anti-systematic in its very dialectical structure? After all, is it possible, according to Kierkegaard, to do philosophy without presupposing some kind of religious commitment or theological foundation – even on the groundless soil of faith which cannot be reduced to any form of philosophical discourse? These questions translate part of the problematic involved in studying the articulation of existence and dialectics in the work of the Danish "solitary individual", who lived out his own dialectical

⁶ Cf. Anthony Rudd, *Kierkegaard and the Limits of the Ethical* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997).

⁷ Cf. Valls's introduction to the Brazilian version of Kierkegaard's *Concept of Irony*; E. Tugendhat, "Das Sein und das Nichts," *Philosophische Aufsätze* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1990).

existence, not without its discrepancies and shortcomings, hoping however to suscite an existential response from his readers. In a nutshell, one may assert that Kierkegaard's dialectic is to be inevitably attached to his existential vocation as a writer. As he says in the *Papirer* (1843),

"I cannot repeat enough what I so frequently have said: I am a poet, but a very special kind, for I am by nature dialectical, and as a rule dialectic is precisely what is alien to the poet."⁸

Although Kierkegaard often employs the term "dialectic" so as to relate his conception of human existence to his reflection upon Christianity, I agree with Jean-Denis Kraege in that "dialectic" in Kierkegaard's literary production, is an ambiguous term, "un terme à géométrie variable, à usages multiples".⁹ In point of fact, this ambiguity is itself implicated in the Kierkegaardian problematic of articulating his conceptions of human existence and divine revelation on the same level of his dialectic. Thus Hermann Diem's work on Kierkegaard's *Existenzdialektik* concludes that the latter's idea of human existence cannot be separated from that of an Absolute Paradox, whereas Jean Wahl's *Études Kierkegaardiennes* suggest that Kierkegaard's view of existence does not presuppose God's revelation.¹⁰ Assuming that Kant's critique of dialectics, and hence his *Religionskritik*, must not be confined to the *KrV* or even to the systematic problem of the transcendental deductions in his three *Kritiken*, Kierkegaard's avoidance of the ontological proof for God's existence not only follows upon (as Green and others have attempted to show) but radicalizes Kant's insofar as the latter's refutation of the proofs shifts away from objective uncertainty towards practical certainty, while Kierkegaard's dialectic of existence allows for truth to be regarded as being both personal and objective.

Pierre Mesnard had already suggested – as early as 1960 – that one of the best epithets to characterize Kierkegaard's life and work as a whole is that of "*une existence dialectique*".¹¹ For Kierkegaard's "dialectical existence" occupies in effect a unique place in the history of Western philosophy: contrary to most thinkers, Kierkegaard's object of reflection is not outside but within one's own subjective sphere of existence. Moreover, his "dialectical existence" is deliberately opposed to a Greek, immanentist conception of "existential dialectic" (CUP 274, 297). Certainly one can assert that the history of philosophy is *grosso modo* the history of the philosopher's understanding of herself and her own world – and such was

⁸ *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, I-VII, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967-78). Hereafter cited by year.

⁹ Jean-Denis Kraege, "La dialectique kierkegaardienne", *Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie* 118 (1986): p. 47.

¹⁰ Hermann Diem, *Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Existence* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1959); id., "Kierkegaard's Bequest to Theology", in Howard Johnson and Niels Thulstrup (eds.), *A Kierkegaard Critique* (Chicago: Gateway, 1967), p. 243-65; Jean Wahl, *Études Kierkegaardiennes* (Paris: Vrin, 1949).

¹¹ Pierre Mesnard, *Kierkegaard. Sa vie, son oeuvre, avec un exposé de sa philosophie* (Paris: PUF, 1960).

the greatness of Hegel's reappropriation of Greek dialectic. However, insofar as he fails to think his own existence inwardly and inseparably from his own thought, the System ends up mistaking the existential moment for any other mediation towards completion and totalizing reconciliation. In Kierkegaard's eloquent words,

"[...] there is required for a subjective thinker imagination and feeling, dialectics in existential inwardness, together with passion. But passion first and last; for it is impossible to think about existence in existence without passion. Existence involves a tremendous contradiction, from which the subjective thinker does not have to abstract, though he can if he will, but in which it is his business to remain. [...] The subjective thinker is not a man of science, but an artist. Existing is an art. The subjective thinker is aesthetic enough to give his life aesthetic content, ethical enough to regulate it, and dialectical enough to interpenetrate it with thought" (CUP 312f.).

If Kant's Copernican revolution brought about the emergence of modern subjectivity (i.e., transcendently conceived), Kierkegaard set out to understand subjectivity qua an existing individual, as he undertook the task par excellence of the subjective thinker in his endless quest of "understanding himself in his existence" (CUP 314). Since human existence must always be taken in its subjective finitude, it stands thus as over against its other, *coram deo*, the other of both thought and existence. As Kierkegaard put it so well: "God does not think, he creates; God does not exist, He is eternal. Man thinks and exists, and existence separates thought and being, holding them apart from one another in succession" (CUP 296). It has been a commonplace to assume that the subjective plays a determinant and decisive role in the Kierkegaardian thought and, as Jean Wahl and other scholars have shown, Kierkegaard's religious fideism preserves some traits which remind us of Luther, Pascal and Hamman, on the one hand, and of his Romantic background on the other (Baader, Fichte, and Schelling).¹² To some extent, one can also affirm that Kant anticipated Kierkegaard's conception of faith as an "objective uncertainty," which places the believer upon the groundlessness, the "seven thousand fathoms" of water. According to Kant, God's existence is not an objective judgment based on human knowledge but a subjective judgment, which provides the basis for our moral belief or faith:

"One cannot directly prove the existence of any thing *a priori*, neither by an analytic nor by a synthetic principle of judgment. [...] The concept of God is, however, the concept of a being that can obligate all moral beings without itself [being] obligated, and, hence, rightful power over them all. To wish to prove that the existence of such a being directly, however, contains a contradiction for a *posse ad esse non valet consequentia* [there is no valid inference from possibility to existence]. Thus only an indirect proof remains, inasmuch as it is assumed that something else be possible, namely, that the knowledge of our duties as (*tanquam*) divine commands is certified and authorized – not in a theoretical but in a pure practical respect – as a principle of practical reason, in which there is a valid inference from ought to can."¹³

¹² Cf. Johnson and Thulstrup (eds.), *A Kierkegaard Critique*, *op. cit.*

¹³ I. Kant, *Opus postumum*, Ak. 22:121, trans. E. Förster (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993), p. 203.

Although he assigns practical rationality to his conception of faith, Kant's morality remains a-historical: transcendental subjectivity implies a universal faith which lacks both the personal and the subjective elements of Kierkegaard's view of faith. In effect, the Kierkegaardian project seeks to establish "truth" in an act of faith which claims to be both personal and objective: hence the dialectic of subjectivity arises from the very problematic constitution of human existence. Because human beings "exist in order to think *sub specie aeterni*" Kierkegaard set out to develop his dialectic of existence, as over against the Hegelian dialectic of the *Geist*, and inspired by the Socratic concept of irony:

"Existence, like movement, is a difficult category to deal with; for if I think it, I abrogate it, and then I do not think it. It might therefore seem to be the proper thing to say that there is something which cannot be thought, namely existence. But the difficulty persists, in that existence itself combines thinking with existing, in so far as the thinker exists. [...] It is on this point about existence, and the demand which the ethical makes upon each existing individual, that one must insist when an abstract philosophy and a pure thought assume to explain everything by explaining away what is decisive. It is necessary only to have the courage to be human... It would be an altogether different thing if pure thought would accept the responsibility of explaining its own relation to the ethical, and to the ethically existing individual" (CUP 274).

This opposition between a Hegelian, idealistic dialectic and a Socratic-inspired, existential dialectic constitutes not only the historical starting point in Kierkegaard's philosophical itinerary but also the kernel of his dialectical articulation between existence and eternity. For existence is inevitably to oppose human existence to the eternal or the very conception of God or the divine (the God, *ho theos*, in Danish, *Guden*). Hence, from an orthodox, fundamentalist standpoint, one may say that Kierkegaard distorted biblical revelation to fit his own preconceived theory of human existence, a theory developed independently of revelation. Nevertheless, within a hermeneutical framework, the very conception of revelation implies both a theological discourse (*deus revelatus*) and a certain "deconstruction" of whatever is taken to be the object revealed (*deus absconditus*), in that the God who reveals himself is a hidden God and hidden things belong to him (FT 82-99; cf. Isaiah 48:6). I think thus that one fails to fairly appreciate the complex articulation of Kierkegaardian terms if one does not take into account the very dialectic which brings together theological and philosophical motifs in his *Denkweg*. This can be seen in the first sample of Kierkegaard's *opera dialectica*, namely, his academic dissertation, *The Concept of Irony, With Constant Reference to Socrates*, orally defended in Latin, albeit written in the vernacular, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at the University of Copenhagen in 1841. Even though this work has been dismissed by some interpreters as "a youthful effort without real significance for understanding Kierkegaard", today it is generally regarded, after Mesnard's popularized aphorism, as an ironic essay on irony itself! The historical importance of this dissertation resides, before anything, in its Hegelian terminology and in its controversial interpretation of the Socratic irony. That year marks also Kierkegaard's final

rupture with his fiancée Regina Olsen (October 11th), and his first trip to Berlin, where he attended Schelling anti-Hegelian *Vorlesungen* at the local University. The first and the last theses of the oral defense, appended to Kierkegaard's original essay, contained the themselves the ironic movement of his dialectical authorship:

- I. *Similitudo Christum inter et Socratem in dissimilitudine praecipue est posita.* (The similarity between Christ and Socrates consists essentially in dissimilarity)...
- XV. *Ut a dubitatione philosophia sic ab ironia vita digna, quae humana vocetur, incipit.* (As philosophy begins with doubt, so also that life which may be called worthy of man begins with irony)

Of course the development of Kierkegaard's concept of irony is much more complex than the explicit points defended in his dissertation: starting from a Hegelian perspective of totality, the "infinite absolute negativity", he moves however toward the original situation of reflection on the level of the contemplating subject, whose irony is but the beginning of subjectivity. In Hegelian terminology, one may say that, for Kierkegaard, the ideal significance of irony is to grasp its meaning as contradiction (ambiguity), its structure as dialectical, its medium the language of reflection, its style antithetical, and its aim self-discovery.¹⁴ In this "inverted" dialectic his essay on irony returns to the first thesis, applied to Kierkegaard's position *vis-à-vis* Hegel's dialectic, as the apparent similarity between them is posited in that dissimilarity. This ambiguous idea of dissimilitude is better understood in the Platonic usage of Socrates' conceptions of irony and dialectic which inspires the entire Kierkegaardian critique of philosophy:

"That irony and dialectic are the two great forces in Plato will surely be admitted by all; but it is not less obvious that there is a double species of irony and a double species of dialectic. There is an irony that is merely a good for thought, quickening it when drowsy, disciplining it when, dissipated. There is another irony that is both the agent and terminus towards which it strives. There is a dialectic which, in constant movement, is always watching to see that the problem does not become ensnared in an accidental conception, a dialectic which, never fatigued, is always ready to set the problem afloat should it ever go aground; in short, a dialectic which always knows how to keep the problem hovering, and precisely in and through this seeks to solve it. There is another dialectic which, since it begins with the most abstract Ideas, seeks to allow these to unfold themselves in more concrete determinations; a dialectic which seeks to obstruct actuality by means of the Ideal."¹⁵

The polysemous usage of the term "*Dialektik*" in Kierkegaard's writings seems to be inevitable if we take into account his irreconcilable opposition between the Hegelian and the Socratic dialectics. For Socrates, the object of philosophical reflection par excellence is the human existence, or as the Delphic oracle ran, "know thyself." Thus the dialectical relationship between the particular and the

¹⁴ S. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 132-46.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 239.

universal, the abstract and the concrete, is but an instrument, an *organon* in the service of the quantitative speculation of the individual upon his own, concrete existence. As one finds in some of Plato's dialogues, the image of Socrates as a dialectician is that of an endless *va-et-vien*, a back and forth motion between opposed poles. As Paul Foulquié has defined it, "La pensée (socratique) est un va-et-vien incessant du particulier au général et du général au particulier, du concret à l'abstrait et de l'abstrait au concret."¹⁶ According to Socrates, the relationship between subject and object, between *anthropos* and *t'agathon* (in the sense of *Summum Bonum*), is based on a paradox, namely that one can know the Good only if one is already good, which implies one's having already made his choices and conducted his life as if he knew indeed the Good. This eudaemonistic morality implies, in Kierkegaard's interpretation of Socrates and Plato, that our human existence cannot be the object of philosophical reflection without entailing at the same time an ethical response on the part of the reflecting individual. Hence the Kierkegaardian conception of a "dialectic of communication". Insofar as Christianity is regarded from a higher, religious standpoint of existential self-positing for human life – *vis à vis* both *aisthesis* (sensibility) and *ethos* (morality) – that is precisely what distinguishes Christ from Socrates, in that the latter's paradoxical relation to the Good does not presuppose the *Summum Bonum* as a paradox *per se*, whereas Christianity evolves out of the Paradox *par excellence*, namely that God became flesh in Jesus Christ yet remaining "the God", "the Eternal", and this is the paradoxical predicament of human existing before God, *coram deo* (CUP 507).

While this existential dialectic remains open toward the paradoxical irruption of the eternal within our temporal becoming, Hegel's *Dialektik* is essentially oriented towards the reconciliation (*Versöhnung*), namely the effective realization of opposed moments in history. To be sure, the key element to be denounced in Hegelian dialectic, according to Kierkegaard, is not the Paradox, but that the *Aufhebung* of what has been posited and its negation come full circle in Absolute Knowing. For Kierkegaard retains the double sense of "*Aufhebung*" (Danish, *Ophaevelse*, "abrogation") to mean at once a *tollere* and a *conservare*, an "abolishing" and an "Aufbewahren," a preservation of contraries (CUP 199). Hegel's dialectic takes place in a teleologically monistic world – not to say "pantheistic" as Kierkegaard called it –, the System whose logic is the primary locus where the *Absoluter Geist* comes into expression. "Was vernünftig ist, das ist wirklich und was wirklich ist, das ist vernünftig" – the Hegelian identification between the Rational and the Effective-Real ends up sacrificing the individuality of the existential subject, on the very altar of Concrete Totality (*das konkrete Allgemeine*). In brief, the positive work of the negative, "the negation of the negation," which operates in the socially, linguistically mediated human spirit in the same logical way as in the totality of the Effective-Real (*Wirklichkeit*), reduces

¹⁶ Paul Foulquié, *La dialectique* (Paris: PUF, 1976), p. 18.

the freedom of the individual to an existential reflection of necessary mediation (*Vermittlung*), in a veritable pantheistic odyssey of the *Absoluter Geist*.¹⁷ Hegel and his dialectic constitute thus, according to Kierkegaard, the chief enemy of Christianity: “The idea of philosophy is mediation,” wrote Kierkegaard in 1841, “– Christianity’s is the paradox.”

2 An Existential Anthropology

Although one may well argue for an atheistic or agnostic reading of Kant, his fideism is usually regarded as placing “faith above reason,” which C. Stephen Evans instructively contrasts with Kierkegaard’s responsible fideism of going even further and positing “faith against reason”: in either case, such a critique of natural and rational evidence must not be reduced to a sort of irrationalism.¹⁸ Kant’s famous assertion, in the second preface to *KrV*, that he “had to abolish (deny, uplift, *aufheben*) knowledge in order to make room for faith”(B xxx) points thus to the inevitability of “pure practical faith” in that the ethical agent’s conviction is “not logical but moral certainty ... I must not even say, ‘It is morally certain that there is a God, etc.,’ but ‘I am morally certain etc.’” (*KrV* A 829, B 857). If no one can be commanded to believe in God’s existence, the pursuit of the highest good is objectively grounded in practical reason, hence as following the principle of universalizability of the moral law (or the categorical imperative). To the negative use of dialectic in theoretical reason, Kant opposes a positive conception of practical reason in the very principle of morality, autonomy, so that one’s subjective principle of action must be objectively held as a universal law.

Commenting on the Kierkegaardian project of “becoming subjective” in order to “become a Christian”, Eduard Geismar has observed that although “Kierkegaard’s thought is through and through idealistic”, as it ultimately takes “his point of departure from an ethical idealism, he nevertheless ends by presenting Christianity as the direct opposite of all human idealism”.¹⁹ Kierkegaard’s attack upon Christendom is thus better understood as part of his anti-Hegelian programmatic critique of speculative idealism. In his first major book., *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, edited in 1843 under the pseudonym of Victor Eremita, Kierkegaard rhetorically and ironically theorizes over the aesthetic life (vol. I: “Diapsalmata”, “Diary of the Seducer”) and suggests the ethical choice (“to choose oneself” as an equivalent expression for the Socratic “*gnothi seauton*”; vol. II : “Aesthetic Validity of Marriage”, “Equilibrium Between the Aesthetical and the Ethical in the Composition of Personality”). Yet the title of the book, as

¹⁷ For an account of Hegel’s indebtedness to Kant’s moral philosophy, see my *Tractatus ethico-politicus* (Porto Alegre: Edipucrs, 1999), chapter 4.

¹⁸ Cf. C. Stephen Evans, *Faith Beyond Reason: A Kierkegaardian Account* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

¹⁹ Eduard Geismar, “La victoire sur le doute chez Kierkegaard”, *Revue d’Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses* 6 (1926), p. 39.

Walter Lowrie remarks, is very revealing in that it intended to oppose not only the Hegelian “both-and” but Hegel’s dialectic of mediation on the whole. In the same year, two other pseudonymous works were published, *Fear and Trembling: A Dialectical Lyric* by Johannes de Silentio, and *Repetition: An Essay in Experimental Psychology*, by Constantine Constantius, both visibly written “for Regina” – like all his pseudonymous works. In his *Edifying Discourses* (1843), Kierkegaard had already pointed to the paradoxical dependence of man upon God’s Truth, as truth pro me, the existing individual. The direct discourse of a sermon, however, was not as efficient as the indirect form of his writings. According to the Kierkegaardian dialectic of indirect communication, Truth is a living and personal existential reality, for God Himself is Subject, and his truth cannot be conveyed as a “doctrine” but as an “alternative” to be chosen, as a possibility to be realized. “Truth is subjectivity”: *Fear and Trembling*, whose main theme is the “teleological suspension of the ethical” in the story of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac moves in effect from the ethical into the religious sphere, in a passionate depiction of the reality of the individual’s existence *coram deo*. Here one finds the Kierkegaardian dialectical conception of faith as human self-consciousness of one’s existence before God, hence as “the paradox of existence” (FT 47):

“The paradox of faith, then, is this: that the single individual is higher than the universal, that the single individual... determines his relation to the universal by his relation to the absolute, not his relation to the absolute by his relation to the universal. The paradox may also be expressed in this way: that there is an absolute duty to God, for in this relationship of duty the individual relates himself as the single individual absolutely to the absolute” (FT 70).

The teleological suspension of the ethical consists in Abraham’s receiving, “by virtue of the absurd,” Isaac back to him, in a veritable transvaluation of the ethical, “au-delà de l’universel”, becoming thus a knight of faith (as opposed to the “knight of infinite resignation, “who renounces everything with no hope of ever getting it back). The anthropological project of this work reveals some of the religious traits which Kierkegaard assigns to the Christian conscious appropriation of faith. As David Swenson remarks, the chief categorical determinants assigned to faith and developed in the essay are:

1. the particularity of its relationship to God, dispensing with every form of universal intermediary – community, state, humanity, tradition – so that the individual sustains *qua* individual an absolute relation to the Absolute;
2. the infinite resignation with respect to finite goods which it psychologically presupposes, thus dissociating itself *toto coelo* from those dreams of wish-fulfillment with which the inexperienced confuse it;
3. the double movement of the spirit, by which after the infinite resignation it again lives in the finite, but only in virtue of a God-relationship which has no dependence upon calculations of the understanding;

4. the fearful teleological suspension of the ethical as exemplified in Abraham, whom the poetic imagination of the author makes to live vividly in the present (PF xv-xliv).²⁰

Such a suspension of ethical consciousness corresponds, on a universal level, to the Christian consciousness of sin and its forgiveness by God, “au-delà de l'éthique”. Johannes de Silentio cannot say anything to explain Abraham's leap of faith, for the knight of faith goes beyond any conceivable mediation, the movement of faith stemming from the paradoxical opposition between God and man. Kierkegaard is refuting thus the Hegelian gospel of “anthropodicy,” according to which man's becoming is a historical manifestation of the *kénose* of the Spirit, in a dialectical theodicy of reconciliation between God and man. In *Repetition*, an experimental psychologist, Constantine Constantius, sets out to make a test of the category of “repetition”, to find out for himself whether he can really experience a repetition of a previous satisfaction as those experienced in a first trip to a foreign town. Thus he decides to make a second visit to Berlin, in order to compare his different impressions and sensations from both visits, and to conclude whether or not he could secure a repetition of determined satisfactions. In brief, Constantine discovers that, from an aesthetic point of view, the second visit did not grant him a repetition of the satisfactions experienced on his first trip. On the other hand, he concludes that an ethical repetition is the very *raison d'être* for living and enjoying life. Yet this ethical repetition leads to something much deeper, namely the religious problem par excellence which consists in “the possibility of a reinstatement of the moral integrity of the personality after an experienced breach” (FT 132ff.). Now, Kierkegaard does not believe in the possibility of “a Job-like return to the happiness of the first immediacy.” For the protagonist of the book, the “young man,” Constantine's friend, undergoes the disillusion and suffering of art impossible love affairs, and yet hopes like Job to receive everything double. “Since the young man was unable to experience the “repetition in the world of actuality, he has to make use of the religious language of the poet, in a “consciousness raised to the second power,” according to which he reappropriates the moral meaning of his existence” (FT 204ff.).

Kierkegaard's aesthetic and ethical writings are but a propaedeutics to the religious consciousness of the Absolute Paradox, as expressed in the Christian faith. Thus, according to Kierkegaard, Christianity is no “solution” to the aesthetic and ethical aporias, in their inquiry into ultimate meaning for our human existence. Since Christianity is not to be understood as a “system of doctrine” but is rather an existential appropriation of truth by the individual in a leap of faith, one finds here again the dialectical relationship between Kierkegaard's existential anthropology and his philosophy of revelation. This philosophical-theological category of the Paradox is largely discussed in his *Philosophical Fragments*, or *A Fragment of Philosophy*, by Johannes Climacus published by Kierkegaard in 1844.

²⁰ Cf. David Swenson, “The Existential Dialectic of Søren Kierkegaard”, *Ethics* 49 (1939): 309-28.

"The paradox", Kierkegaard writes in his Journals, "is not a concession but a category, an ontological definition which expresses the relation between an existing cognitive spirit and the eternal truth (1834; PF 37). As I have already mentioned, the anthropological problem can be dealt with in function of the Socratic-Platonic search for the Truth of human existence. On the title page of the *Fragments*, one finds the intriguing question: "Is an historical point of departure possible for an eternal consciousness; how can such a point of departure have any other than a merely historical interest; is it possible to base an eternal happiness upon historical knowledge?"

Starting from the assumption that the Socratic-Platonic "immanent" conception of truth "within ourselves" is not correct, Kierkegaard proposes in his "project of thought" that truth in this case would have to be brought to us from the "outside." Instead of the maieutic method of helping others to become conscious of themselves and bring to birth the truth which they already bore in themselves, Climacus proposes that we learn the truth from a teacher, one who possesses that which mankind does not know or possess. This Unknown, Kierkegaard calls it "the God" (Danish *Guden*, as opposed to *Gud*, without the article), after the Platonic usage of *ho theos*. "The Teacher," says Climacus, "is then, the God himself, who in acting as an occasion prompts the learner to recall that he is in Error (as opposed to and against the Truth), and that by reason of his own guilt" (PF 49f.). This state of "being in error by reason of one's own guilt", Climacus calls it Sin. This wholly otherness of the God, the Unknown as such, was revealed to mankind in Jesus Christ, the God-man who came to liberate us from the Error and from *hamartia*, Sin: "And ye shall know the Truth, and the Truth shall make you free" (John 8:32). We recall that the Judaeo-Christian conception of personal truth, *emeth*, renders problematic our translations of *aletheia* and its *rapprochements* with the Jewish view of truth as trust and the Christian doctrine of revelational truth. Kierkegaard goes on to expose his gospel of the Absolute Paradox:

"What then did he (man) lack? The consciousness of sin, which he indeed could no more teach to another than another could teach it to him, but only the God – if the God consents to become a Teacher. But this was his purpose, as I have imagined it. In order to be man's teacher, the God proposed to rake himself like the individual man, so that he no longer understand his folly. Thus our paradox is rendered still more appalling, on the same paradox has the double aspect which proclaims it as the Absolute Paradox; negatively by revealing the absolute unlikeness of sin, positively by proposing to do away with the absolute unlikeness in absolute likeness" (PF 59).

Like Kant, Kierkegaard recasts the problem of religion in moral terms, but only to exhaust the possibilities of attaining to the expectations set by this asymmetric relationship of human finiteness in the face of an absolute, infinite God:

"The ethical is the universal and as such it is also the divine. Thus it is proper to say that every duty is a duty to God, but if no more can be said than this, then it is also said that I have no duty to God. The duty becomes duty by being traced back to God, but in the duty itself I do not enter into relation to God ... If in this connection I then

say that it is my duty to love God, I am actually pronouncing only a tautology, inasmuch as 'God' in a totally abstract sense is here understood as the divine – that is, the universal, that is duty. The whole existence of the human race rounds itself off as a perfect, self-contained sphere, and then the ethical is that which limits and fills at one and the same time. God comes to be an invisible vanishing point, an impotent thought; his power is only in the ethical, which fills all existence" (FT 68).

Kierkegaard is dealing thus both with the problem of negative theology (*comment ne pas parler – au sujet de Dieu en tant que Tout-Autre*) and the challenge of rethinking and reintroducing the tragic in modern philosophy (existential subjectivity, both historically and socially constituted). The Kierkegaardian hero of faith, Abraham, can only believe and act "by virtue of the absurd" (FT 56). Kierkegaard draws a distinction between the paradoxical faith by virtue of the absurd evoked in Fear and Trembling and faith in the Absurd, or in the Absolute Paradox, as we find it the Concluding Unscientific Postscript. The dialectical terminology of de Silentio's *Fragments* was notably retaken by Johannes Climacus in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard's most monumental philosophical work. As over against the Hegelian system which dialectically mediates *Geist* and *Dasein*, Kierkegaard proceeds to develop his existential project of the historical, outlined in the *Fragments*, in a dialectic of existence which intensifies the ontological abyss between the eternal and the temporal. *Guden i Tiden*, "the God in time", is for Kierkegaard the most paradoxical conception of the historical: the ultimate "contradiction of existence" is not the Eternal as coming into being but as coming into temporal existence with all the contingency and particularity implicated in the historical Incarnation. "God does not exist, he is eternal", writes Climacus in the *Postscript*, using the same category the Paradox which defined "the God" as the Unknown to human existence, in the *Fragments*. The central idea thus is not that of an *essentia* of God, but is rather that of the God coming into existence (Danish, *Tilblivelse*), the Eternal entering into the spatial-temporal existence of man: "The historical", writes Climacus, "is that the God, the Eternal, has come into existence at a particular time as an individual human being" [*Det historiske er, at Guden, den Evige, er bleven til i et bestemt Tidsmoment som et enkelt Menneske*] (CUP 178-183, 296, 527f.). This mimic-pathetic-dialectic composition, full of humor, satire and irony, besides ridiculing Hegel and his dialectic of mediation, seeks to provide the "historical costume" for the Kierkegaardian, project of man's appropriation of truth, announced in the *Fragments*. This "historical costume" however is provided by "Christianity" alone. In the First Part of the *Postscript*, Climacus deals with the "objective problem, concerning the truth of Christianity, "under two main headings, "The Historical Point of View" and "The Speculative Point of View". In a word, Kierkegaard shows the impossibility of attaining an objective knowledge of Christianity's truth (or untruth) by either approach, via the Scriptures or the Christian tradition, or via any speculative philosophy like Hegel's. All one is left with is an agonistic, provisional conclusion, for Climacus goes so far as to affirm that "a logical system is possible, but an existential system is

impossible”(CUP 101, 107). Thus in the Second Part, Kierkegaard emphasizes the ethical nature of truth, in that truth is given not in the “what” but in the “how” of the subject-object quest, therefore “truth is subjectivity”:

“Objectively the interest is focused merely on the thought-content, subjectively on the inwardness. At its maximum this inward ‘how’ is the passion of the infinite, and the passion of the infinite is the truth. But the passion of the infinite is precisely subjectivity, and thus subjectivity becomes the truth. Objectively there is no infinite decision, and hence it is objectively in order to avoid the difference between good and evil, together with the principle of contradiction and therewith also the infinite difference between the true and the false. Only in subjectivity is there decision, to seek objectivity is to be in error. It is the passion of the infinite that is the decisive factor and not its content, for its content is precisely itself. In this manner subjectivity and the subjective ‘how’ constitute the truth. [...] An objective uncertainty held fast in an appropriation-process of the most passionate inwardness is the truth, the highest truth attainable for an existing individual. [...] But the above definition of truth is an equivalent expression for faith. Without risk there is no faith. Faith is precisely the contradiction between the infinite passion of the individual’s inwardness and the objective uncertainty. If I am capable of grasping God objectively, I do not believe, but precisely because I cannot do this I must believe. If I wish to preserve myself in faith I must constantly be intent upon holding fast the objective uncertainty I am out ‘upon the seventy thousand fathoms of water’, and yet believe” (CUP 181f.).

In contrast to the *Fragments*’ anthropology, Climacus develops here a philosophy of man in which the eternal is already given as a man-inhabiting possibility, since faith is identified with truth, and thus Christianity’s offer of an “eternal happiness” constitutes his ultimate self-consciousness vis à vis the eternal qualifications of his existence. One detects here an anthropological return to the Socratic existence, in that one’s appropriation of the Truth requires an attitude of inward passion. Personal ethics, complicity with God, is therefore given in the anthropological becoming, which is expressed by Kierkegaard as “becoming subjective”. As Gregor Malantschuk has pointed out, “this whole discussion must be understood as an attempt to understand the ontological both in its relation to the sphere of the human and to Christianity”.²¹ One may recall *en passant* the early Heidegger’s understated appropriation of Kierkegaard’s conceptions of *Angst*, *Ständigkeit* (constancy) and *Wiederholung* (the latter indeed refers us back to the Diedrichs German edition of *Repetition*, which came out in 1909) in the analytic of Dasein’s finitude, beyond subjectivity and objectivity.²²

²¹ Gregor Malantschuk, *Kierkegaard’s Thought*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 123.

²² Cf. John Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, p. 82s.; Patricia Huntington, “Heidegger’s Reading of Kierkegaard Revisited”, in Martin J. Matušík and Merold Westphal, *Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity* (Bloomington: Indiana U.P., 1995), pp. 43-65.

3 An Existential Dialectic

Even though I did not delve into an endless archaeology of both Kant and Kierkegaard commentators, I have sought to emphasize the impact of the former's "primacy of practical reason" upon the latter's anti-idealist reappropriation of a transcendental anti-realism recast in an existential account of religion. Hence we may say that the relationship between morality and religion seems to allow for a reduction of the latter to the former in Kant, but by virtue of an analogous approach to dialectic and existence, in Kierkegaard, such a reductionism is simply out of question. Insofar as modernity has been held captive within its own dialectic of subjectivity, a resulting anthropologization of transcendence seems to undermine the very attempt to unmask foundationalist metaphysics. If Kant's critique opens up the horizon of a practical metaphysics, Kierkegaard definitely denounces the inadequacies of both liberal and neo-orthodox theological revindications of the Kantian legacy. From a liberal standpoint, the problem of evil cannot be handled without recourse to a conception of a trans-ethical ontology or some metaphysical category that transcends the ethical. Neo-orthodox thinking faces a similar kind of difficulty as it tends to reduce religious language to an ethical interplay of coding and decoding. In order to better understand the philosophical development of the Kierkegaardian dialectic of existence, I should invoke here two works that had been published between the appearance of the *Fragments* and the *Postscript: The Concept of Anxiety*, by Vigilius Haufniensi (1844), and *Stages on Life's Way: Studies by Sundry Persons*, published by Hilarius Bookbinder (1845). It is in the second work that we find a key statement for understanding the Kierkegaardian philosophical anthropology, in the following words by Frater Taciturnus:

"The metaphysical is abstraction, there is no man who exists metaphysically. The metaphysical, ontology is but does not exist; for when it exists it is in the esthetic in the ethical, in the religious, and when it is it is the abstraction or the prius for the esthetic, the ethical, the religious."²³

One notices here that, according to Kierkegaard, the ontological does not contain any concretion, it rather remains on the abstract level of comprehensive meaning, that is, it can signify either that something is or that it is not, without determining the concrete subject of thought. That is the reason why Kierkegaard prefers to use "existence" as a concrete-ontological expression for understanding human nature, whose being is existentially determined in the concretions of the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious. In the most important section of *Stages*, "Guilty/Not Guilty: A Passion Narrative", Quidam's diary develops the existential movement which had been introduced in *Either/Or* with "the unhappiest man's" complex of problems, yet unresolved in spite of Judge William's attempts to tackle it in the second part of *Either/Or*. Those were the same ethical problems which

²³ *Stages on Life's Way*, trans. W. Lowrie (Princeton UP, 1940), p. 124; cf. CUP 285.

the “young man”, in *Repetition*, looked vainly for, a solution in the book of Job. Finally, in *Fear and Trembling*, Abraham did lose everything to win it back by faith, but he is still inadequate to save the unhappy individual from his “preexistent guilt”. Thus Quidam’s diary appears to reproduce the double movement of the sinful individual towards a positive relation to the universal. As Kierkegaard avowed in the *Papirer* (1845),

“This experiment (Guilty?/Not Guilty?) is the first attempt in all the pseudonymous works at an existential dialectic in double-reflection. It is not the communication which is in the form of double-reflection, (for all the pseudonyms are that) but the existing person herself exists in this. Thus she does not give up immediately but keeps it and yet gives it up, keeps love’s desire and gives it up.”

As Kierkegaard admitted in the entry cited above, his dialectical project had to undergo “enormous detours” in order to attain the concretization of the religious stage. Quidam’s “story to suffering,” for instance, reproducing his breaking off the engagement, shows the struggling individual before the transcendental as something external to him, before awakening to the ethical consciousness of God’s intervention (without resorting to any logical standpoint such as that of a theodicy, or a theology of *creatio continuata*). In an intriguing reading of Job’s example, Quidam writes:

“Hence it is a weak point in the structure of the Book of Job that God appears in the clouds and also appears as the most accomplished dialectician; for what makes God the terrible dialectician He is, is precisely the fact that one has Him at very much closer quarters, and therewith the softest whisper is more blissful, and the softest whisper is more terrible, than seeing Him enthroned upon the clouds and hearing Him in the thunder. Hence one cannot argue dialectically with Him, for all the dialectical power in the soul of the man concerned God uses against this man.”²⁴

In short, what Kierkegaard wants to stress in his “dialectic of the detour” is the indirectness of the Christian solution to the human problem. As the individual moves away from the negative (his ethical status of guilt) toward the religious (“the second immediacy”), this movement toward the individual’s “self-annihilation before God” remains however on the level of what Kierkegaard calls “Religiousness A.” (CUP 493-8). In order to attain “the specifically Christian religiousness,” Religiousness B, with its absurd claim about “God in time,” the existing individual has to break “with the understanding, and with thinking, and with immanence”: hence the indirect form of addressing those who are called to repentance. In the Religiousness A, the individual experiences a certain religious self-inwardness but this existential dialectic does not correspond to his ultimate ontological structure in that she dares to annihilate herself *coram deo*. It is thus only in Christianity, in its indirect revelation of a personal relationship between man and the paradoxical Eternal existing in the God-man that the individual can find her dialectical *raison d’être*. As Kierkegaard writes in the *Journals*, in 1848,

²⁴ *Stages on Life’s Way*, op. cit., p. 224.

"If a person could have empirical certainty that God wanted to use him as an instrument (as a king, a cabinet member) – how easily he would be able to submit to everything in every sacrifice. But is it possible to have an empirical or even a purely immediate certainty about my relationship to God? God is spirit. To a spiritual being it is impossible to have a relationship other than a spiritual relationship; but a spiritual relationship is eo ipso dialectical. [...] The relationship to Christ is this – a person test for himself whether Christ is everything to him, and then says, I put everything into this. But I cannot get an immediate certainty about my relationship to Christ. I cannot get an infinite certainty about whether I have faith, for to have faith is this very dialectical suspension which is continually in fear and trembling and yet never despairs; faith is precisely this infinite self-concern which keeps one awake in risking everything, this self-concern about whether one really has faith – and precisely this self-concern is faith."

In *The Concept of Dread* (anxiety, *angustiae*, *angoisse*, *Angst*), the psychologist Vigilius Haufniensis depicts man as "a synthesis of the soulish and the bodily", united in a third factor, "the spirit". The spirit is related to itself and to its situation as dread, *Angst*. *Angst* is to be distinguished "from fear and similar concepts which refer to something definite, whereas dread is the reality of freedom as possibility anterior to possibility": dialectically speaking, *Angst* is "a sympathetic antipathy and an antipathetic sympathy".²⁵ As an expression of freedom, anxiety is related to guilt and may take different forms as an expression of the original sin. It is only by "faith's anticipation" that the individual can conquer anxiety in a qualitative leap of faith in the eternal. In fact, the category of the leap is a fundamental one in the Kierkegaardian dialectic between the quantitative (the objective) and the qualitative (the individual). As Malantschuk has remarked, "the extensive use of the category of the leap in *The Concept of Dread* points specifically to the individual's participation in guilt". "In a decisive sense", he adds, "the qualitative leap appeals only in relation to Christianity".²⁶ In his "anthropological contemplation", Vigilius Haufniensis concludes that the essential difference between man and the animal resides in the former's destiny for eternity, in that man is a synthesis of eternity and temporality.²⁷ In *Either/Or* Kierkegaard had already indicated what would be his religious anthropology of the eternal, according to which the self posits itself by choosing itself:

"I choose the absolute, for I myself am the absolute, I posit the absolute and I myself am the absolute, but in complete identity with this I can say that I choose the absolute which chooses me, that I posit the absolute which posits me [...]. And what is the absolute? It is myself in my eternal validity."²⁸

This same identification between selfhood and will, Kierkegaard relates to his anthropological dialectic of the infinite and the finite, the necessary and the possible, which is in fact an extension of the dialectic eternity-time. Such was

²⁵ *The Concept of Dread*, trans. W. Lowrie (Princeton UP, 1957), p. 61.

²⁶ Malantschuk, op. cit., p. 98.

²⁷ *The Concept of Dread*, op. cit., p. 122.

²⁸ *Either/Or*, trans. W. Lowrie (New York: Anchor, 1959), vol. 2, p. 217.

indeed dealt with in *The Sickness Unto Death*, by Anti-Climacus, edited by Kierkegaard in 1849, in which he develops a veritable “anatomy of melancholy.” The book begins with an enigmatic enunciation of the anthropological problem:

“A human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation’s relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation’s relating itself to itself. A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two. Considered in this way, a human being is still not a self” (SUD 13).

Thus one may interpret Kierkegaard’s anthropology, as opposed to the “essentialism” of idealist philosophical anthropologies, as an existentialist psychology of a fragmented self, whose “existence is not only at variance with his ideal nature, but really its polar opposite” (SUD 20, 30). By affirming that “despair is the sickness unto death”, Kierkegaard persuades his teachers to recognize their sinful condition of death-bound beings and to discover their “having a self and an eternal self”. For “despair is sin”, insofar as sin is defined as the disposition “in despair not to will to be oneself, or in despair to will to be oneself”, sin is thus “the intensification of despair” (SUD 77). On the other hand, faith is paradoxically defined as “the opposite of despair” the dialectical abrogation (*Ophævelse*) of *Angst*: “in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it”, namely, in God himself (SUD 49). It is God himself in the “qualitative difference between God and man”, that sets man qua sinner separated from Himself “by the most chasmal qualitative abyss”. As Anti-Climacus says,

“The teaching about sin – that you and I are sinners – a teaching that unconditionally splits up ‘the crowd’, confirms the qualitative difference between God and man more radically than ever before, for again only God can do this; sin is indeed: before God. In no way is a man so different from God as in this, that he, and that means every man, is a sinner, and is that ‘before God’, whereby the opposites are kept together in a double sense: they are held together (*continentur*), they are not allowed to go away from each other, but by being held together in this way the differences show up all the more sharply, just as when two colors are held together, *opposita juxta se posita magis illucesunt* (the opposites appeal more clearly by juxtaposition). Sin is the one and only predication about a human being that in no way, either *via negationis* (by denial) or *via eminentiae* (by idealization), can be stated of God. To say of God (in the same sense as saying that he is not finite and, consequently, *via negationis*, that he is infinite) that he is not a sinner is blasphemy. [...] In turn, of course, God is separated from man by the same chasmal qualitative abyss when he forgives sins” (SUD 121 f.).

Because faith cannot be reduced to any form of knowledge, including the historical, Kierkegaard’s articulation of existence and dialectic leaves to the believer the pathos of giving birth to this indirect form of communication at the heart of subjectivity’s encounter with its other – the very other and every other that intersubjectively constitutes selfhood – as faith operates a coming into existence, to believe what it does not see:

“Faith is here taken first in its direct and ordinary sense [belief], as the relationship of the mind to the historical; but secondly, also in the eminent sense, the sense in which the word can be used only once [...] only in one relationship. From the eternal point of view, one does not *have Faith* that the God exists [eternally is], even if one assumes he does exist” (PF 108).

Conclusion

I should like to say, by way of conclusion, that Kierkegaard’s dialectic of existence can be opposed to Kant’s transcendental anthropology, although it comes closer to it precisely as it seeks to avoid Hegel’s dialectical reconciliation of thought and existence, within the very tension it maintains between nature and freedom, knowledge and faith – a dualism which Kierkegaard deliberately reproduces in his refusal to naturalize the absolute paradox (eternal-temporality), very reminiscent of Kant’s own anti-realistic attempt to overcome the opposition between rationalism and empiricism. Stephen Evans has convincingly argued that in light of Kierkegaard’s ambiguous, twofold usage of the term “knowledge” it can be fairly shown that if one assumes, with the Danish thinker, that knowledge depends on subjectivity, then it makes sense to rub the lamp of freedom with passion and find God. The dialectic of existence thus oscillates between God’s “given” existence (such as in a realistic account of faith) and a proto-phenomenological construction of God (anti-realism) and this refers us back to Kant’s own refusal of naïve realism and idealism – recast by Husserl’s phenomenology.²⁹ Since existence is not a concept (*Begriff*) one cannot learn the meaning of the word from one’s own particular existence, just as one doesn’t learn the meaning of “white” by seeing white objects – hence Kierkegaard’s anti-realism. Kierkegaard anticipates thus a refusal of classical foundationalism, referring us back to the debate among realists and anti-realists (as one finds, say, in John Rawls’s critique of moral intuitionism) and centered around “Kantian issues”.³⁰ Kierkegaard’s comments in Chapter III of the *Postscript* on Hegel’s supposed overcoming of Kant’s skepticism through the dialectical method – Hegel’s contention is that skepticism contains the seeds of its own destruction, i.e. doubt overcomes itself, like Descartes’ (CUP 199) – that if there is objective propositional truth, how to live truly? As Evans argues, human existence mirrors human knowing, insofar as existence and knowing involve “reduplication”, that is, they involve the actualization of conceived possibilities. It is this sense that one might go so far as to say that the pagan who believes in “false” gods is more authentic than the Christian who prays to the “true” God in a false spirit. As a dialectician of existence – a postmodern *avant la lettre* –, Kierkegaard resorts to “indirect communication” so as to keep the interplay of different strands of

²⁹ Cf. C. Stephen Evans, “Realism and anti-realism in Kierkegaard’s *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments*”, in Alastair Hannay and Gordon Marino (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), p.173.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

interpretation, as the principle of pseudonymity (assuming that the Kierkegaardian corpus be read as different authors and not as a single, unified author) attests to the contradictions unresolved in philosophical experimentalism. Kierkegaard's "movement of infinity" brings thus forth a dialectical return to the temporal appropriation of faith, God's forgiveness of sin, as the existing individual embraces Christianity *hic et nunc*, and yet without succumbing to a happy-end trivialization of sorts. Such is the paradoxical "encounter" of the eternal with the temporal. Just like the Moment of the Incarnation, when the Eternal entered the temporal, Kierkegaard refers to the category of the Instant (Danish *Ojeblikket*, "a glance of the eye, eyeblink", German *Augenblick*) as the dialectical kernel of our existential consciousness:

"If the instant is posited, so is the eternal – but also the future, which comes again like the past [...] The concept around which everything turns in Christianity, the concept which makes all things new, is the fullness of time, is the instant as eternity, and yet this eternity is at once the future and the past."³¹

Although I cannot examine here the Kierkegaardian conception of time, the dialectical articulation of time and existence, as can be seen, underlies his entire philosophy of existence, just as the opposition between "eternity" and "temporality": the instant, as "an atom of eternity", serves to restructure the whole synthesis of selfhood into a spiritual one, in man's "ascent" toward its Other and the Unknown. In the last analysis, the Eternal transcends every synthesis between eternity and time, infinity and finiteness, preserving not only the Absolute Paradox in itself but above all the wholly otherness of God. It is only because of the Eternal, therefore, that humans can still hope to attain their ultimate vocation of becoming a Christian. As Kierkegaard writes in *Works of Love* (1847),

"The possibility of the good is more than possibility, for it is the eternal. This is the basis of the fact that one who hopes can never be deceived, for to hope is to expect the possibility of the good; but the possibility of the good is eternal. [...] But if there is less love in him, there is also less of the eternal in him; but if there is less of the eternal in him, there is also less possibility, less awareness of possibility (for possibility appears through the temporal movement of the eternal within the eternal in a human being)."³²

As one sets out to reexamine Kierkegaard's dialectic of existence throughout his main writings – even in a quite synoptic analysis such as this –, one may be said to proceed from a "dialectical existence" toward an "existential anthropology", and then to an "existential dialectic." Besides the soundness of this *jeu de mots* (which remains very questionable, no doubt!), I intended to recast Kierkegaard's dialectic of existence as an anthropological movement beyond all metaphysical underpinnings. If Heidegger reinterpreted the Kantian critique and

³¹ *Either/Or*, op. cit., p. 167.

³² *Works of Love*, trans. D. Swenson and L.M. Swenson (Princeton U.P., 1946), p. 157.

Western philosophy in order to retrieve a *Fundamentalontologie*, it was Kierkegaard who first “deconstructed” idealist philosophy in order to understand human historicity in its most primordial temporality, in a radical move against not being eternally destined and, at the same time, paradoxically choosing to project himself within, and out of the concrete flux of becoming, as an existing being (*Tilværelse*). The cunning aporia which translates so well the modern phenomena of “anthropologization” of the Transcendent in hermeneutical theology (e.g. Barth, Bultmann, Bloch, Tillich, Ebeling, Fuchs) and its philosophical counterpart of “detranscendentalizing” the Transcendental (e.g. the later Heidegger, the later Wittgenstein, Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, Habermas) are not *abscondita* nor *incognita* in Kierkegaard’s dialectic of existence: they are the very food for thought in his dialectical reflection. The “double movement” towards the religious transvaluation of the ethical, as we have seen, presupposes a “double-reflection” in which the existing individual herself moves and exists. For Kierkegaard, such an openness to the transcendent had to be found in the human ontological structure itself as an existing individual, a self. The existential category of subjectivity can be said to be correlate of both the instant and existence itself. As Robert Roberts’s put it in his felicitous words,

“‘Existence’ (*Existents*) denotes the concreteness and individuality of a life lived in time and the requirements on personality that are implied by these features of selfhood, as contrasted with and contravened by the efforts of aesthetes and ‘pure thinkers’ to conduct their lives abstractly *sub specie aeterni*, neglecting the particular self (oneself!) to be formed in accordance with the noble concepts and chosen from among the interesting possibilities.”³³

“That individual” (*hiin Enkelte*), the fragmented, self-displaced author who addresses the individual reader seeks no followers, after all, the existing individual is itself opposed to the crowd. And yet, by way of its dialectic of existence, human life is that the self, the paradoxically singular individual, keeps coming into being through one’s daily choices and is condemned to keep choosing so as to make this very existence of one’s own.

³³ Cf. Robert Roberts, “Existence, emotion, and virtue: Classical themes in Kierkegaard”, in Hannay and Marino (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, op. cit., p. 178.